5-2018

Supporting Student-Parents: A Qualitative Exploration of the Online Presence of Support at Postsecondary Institutions

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SUPPORTING STUDENT-PARENTS: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF THE ONLINE PRESENCE OF SUPPORT AT POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS

A thesis

Presented to

The School of Social Sciences, Education & Business

Department of Higher Education and Student Development

Taylor University

Upland, Indiana

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

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by

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May 2018

Higher Education and Student Development
Taylor University
Upland, Indiana

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Thesis of

Paige L. McCourt

entitled

Supporting Student-Parents: A Qualitative Exploration of the Online Presence of Support at Postsecondary Institutions

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

Master of Arts degree
in Higher Education and Student Development

May 2018

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Abstract

Increasing numbers of nontraditional students, including student-parents, are enrolling in postsecondary education. These students are raising dependent children while pursuing a degree and often require specialized support services, such as childcare, flexible course schedules, family housing, and financial assistance. Qualitative document analysis of the online resources at 50 postsecondary institutions' revealed the presence and absence of student support services at these campuses. An initial analysis of the documents generated five themes regarding support for student-parents: (1) structured support services and offices; (2) family housing options or assistance; (3) specific financial aid options for student-parents; (4) the availability of parenting resources to both employees and students of the institution; and (5) other considerations suggested by the data. The study recorded frequencies of support as appropriate for each theme, which generated implications for practice as well as future research when considering how to better support student-parents on campus.

Acknowledgements

To everyone who asked about my progress, bought me a cup of coffee, encouraged me, gave me a hug, or offered to help in any way possible – thank you. Your ongoing presence in this research mattered and filled me with hope when I was unsure if I could finish.

To Cohort X – you are the greatest friends, classmates, colleagues, and family I could have asked for in the past two years. Thank you for challenging me, supporting me, loving me, and inspiring me. I'll miss having you as my built in support system in the coming years.

To Tim Herrmann and Scott Gaier – thank you for the endless number of emails you took the time to write to me as I waded into the unknown, the countless ideas you brainstormed when I hit dead ends, and the encouragement you provided when I felt inadequate to complete this project. Your collective wisdom, patience, and confidence in me inspires me daily.

To Caleb – thank you for the many hours you spent sitting beside me as I sorted through pages and pages of data, for the reminders that this project does not define me, for the ice cream and coffee that sustained me as I wrote, and for your unending love that you share so freely. I love you dearly.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, approximately 4.8 million undergraduate students currently raise their dependent children while attending school (Field, 2017). Students with children represent just one population of nontraditional students on the college or university campus, and they desire support to meet their specific needs. Institutions provide support in a variety of areas, including financial aid, academics, advising, counseling, specific group resources, and more (de Oliveira Urpia & da Rocha Sampaio, 2012; Gonchar, 1995; Medved & Heisler, 2002; Robertson, Weider, Weider, & Morey, 2012; van Rhijn, 2014). However, institutional support does not operate as a one-size-fits-all model. Instead, students utilize the support that best suits their specific needs. In the case of nontraditional students—more specifically, students with children—the necessary support does not always exist (Abrams & Jernigan, 1984; Bettinger, Boatman, & Long, 2013; Cerven, 2013; Flores, 2014; Harmon, 2013).

Undergraduate students with children, also referred to as student-parents, enter postsecondary education attempting to balance various roles besides that of student. Such roles may include parent, partner or spouse, employee, friend, and/or others (Brooks, 2015; Markle, 2015). In contrast, traditional students are considered students without dependents who enroll in postsecondary education immediately following their high school graduation, attend school full-time, and graduate before the age of twenty-

four (Munday, 1976). Though many similarities exist between students with children and traditional students, undergraduate student-parents require another level of support that their childless peers may not. Services such as childcare and flexible class times become key areas of support student-parents desire from their institutions as they seek to be the best students and parents possible (Branscomb, 2006; Bussey, 2002; Gonchar, 1995; Robertson et al., 2012).

Postsecondary institutions operate to equip students for the workforce as well as to contribute to society at large. In order to do this, programs and offices around campuses offer co-curricular support to supplement teaching occurring in the classroom. These co-curricular programs provide support reaching out to underrepresented groups through services such as disability offices, multicultural offices, women's resource centers, and the like (Harmon, 2013). Additionally, institutions offer academic support to their students to foster success in the classroom. Institutions offer tutoring and training in study skills to at-risk students (Abrams & Jernigan, 1984). Relationships with faculty have also proven to be increasingly beneficial to students (Çivitci, 2015). Such a variety of support on a campus represents the university's desire to ensure students are fully equipped to persist to graduation as an integrated part of life at the institution (Bettinger et al., 2013).

Current literature shows student-parents desire specific types of support on their campuses, including affordable childcare, flexibility in scheduling, and competent advisors. (de Oliveira Urpia & da Rocha Sampaio, 2012; Gonchar, 1995; Medved & Heisler, 2002; Robertson et al., 2012; van Rhijn, 2014). Students with children recognize the ways in which their institutions try to support them but often desire support in

different or deeper ways (Robertson et al., 2012). Due to the unique qualities of student-parents, support must be focused on meeting their diverse needs as learners.

Institutions obviously offer support to students on their campuses. Yet, not all services meet the needs of underrepresented populations. Colleges and universities seek to offer better access through the creation of programs reaching out to specific groups. Reaching all groups proves to be a difficult task. However, many student-parents still desire greater support from the institutions they attend (Branscomb, 2006; Robertson et al., 2012). To understand better the support currently existing for student-parents, the study sought to answer the following question: What institutional support is available for 18-24 year old undergraduate students with children at various postsecondary institutions in the United States?

Chapter 2

Literature Review

As institutions seek to meet the needs of more diverse student bodies, understanding the members making up their bodies becomes more important (Munday, 1976). Undergraduate students with dependents comprise one portion of the new demographics. Beyond bringing a child to campus, these students carry a multitude of other needs the institution may attempt to meet. Such needs range from childcare to financial aid to flexibility in the classroom and beyond (de Oliveira Urpia & da Rocha Sampaio, 2012; Gonchar, 1995; Medved & Heisler, 2002; Robertson et al., 2012; van Rhijn, 2014). Institutions of higher education must seek to understand better the ways in which these areas of support are received and utilized by students with children (Abrams & Jernigan, 1984).

Changing Student Demographics

Colleges and universities throughout the United States have been affected by the rising number of students no longer fitting the category of traditional student. According to Munday (1976), the traditional student population has historically been young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 from white, middle-class, American homes who enroll as full-time students. However, Munday predicted a change in the coming years. Forty years later, the National Center for Education Statistics (2016) reported that 8.2 million of the 20.2 million students enrolled in postsecondary education are demographically

categorized as nontraditional students. Some identifiers of the nontraditional student include postponed enrollment or re-enrollment in postsecondary education, whether full- or part-time; full-time employment; and different means of receiving financial aid due to being independent, married, or having dependents (Robertson et al., 2012, p. 3).

Varying motivations for enrolling in a postsecondary program exist but fail to be accommodated through the classroom and on-campus experiences of nontraditional students. Fewer nontraditional students persist to graduation than do their traditional student counterparts (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Students above the age of 24 often balance two or more life roles (e.g., spouse, parent, employee), drawing time, energy, and attention away from their roles as students. Individuals must determine levels of engagement with each role by prioritizing the attention given to each role, thus often creating conflicting emotions regarding the student role (Markle, 2015).

Understanding the Experiences of Student-Parents

Student-parents comprise one subset of nontraditional students. These students fit the specifications of traditional students with the exception of their role as a parent being balanced with their efforts to complete a degree program (Robertson et al., 2012). A handful of studies address the experiences of these students at all levels and ages in attempts to understand better their needs in terms of institutional and social-emotional support (de Oliveira Urpia & da Rocha Sampaio, 2012; Gonchar, 1995; Medved & Heisler, 2002; Robertson et al., 2012; van Rhijn, 2014). Little data has been isolated regarding student-parents between the ages of 18 and 24 enrolled in full-time education, despite their needs for additional support in earning a degree, raising children, and making connections with peers.

Role conflict among student-parents. One recurring theme found in research is the tension student-parents feel about splitting their time between parenthood and being a student (Brooks, 2015; Gonchar, 1995; Robertson et al., 2012). Many student-parents balance multiple other roles such as employee, spouse, and family member to which they must devote time (Robertson et al., 2012). Student-mothers of all ages regularly experience role-conflict or role-stress in attempting to balance their lives as students and their lives as parents. Gonchar (1995) defined this tension as the "internal conflict or feelings of selfishness" experienced by student-mothers throughout their education (p. 230).

A study looking at the experiences of student-parents in the United Kingdom found this student population experienced a range of emotions in reconciling their roles. Such students commonly described emotions of pride and happiness as a result of setting a positive example for their children (Brooks, 2015). Yet, guilt—tying back to the tension at the core of role-conflict—appeared as the emotion experienced by the majority of the sample (Brooks, 2015). Student-mothers worried about time and energy spent on schoolwork as opposed to time spent with their children, who they worried were "suffering" due to academic choices (Brooks, 2015, p. 509). Others worried that they failed to prioritize their schoolwork as much as they should, placing their role as mother first. Some participants felt the role-stress pulling in both directions. One Brazilian student-mother felt that "she [could not] fully accomplish anything . . . [in either] her mother or academic positions" (de Oliveira Urpia & da Rocha Sampaio, 2012, p. 481).

Student-fathers who participated in the same study rarely felt these tensions. Brooks (2015) hypothesized such a lack of tension in fathers was due to perceptions of a

"good father" being centered on providing economic stability rather than childcare (p. 512). For student-fathers, taking time to focus on their student-role meant they were also fulfilling their father-role by working to provide better financially to their families (Brooks, 2015).

Developmental characteristics of 18-24 year old students. One of the reasons why student-mothers and student-fathers feel different strains in their roles relates back to how 18-24 year old students understand themselves. Erikson (1994) explored the development of identity in seeking to understand the basic drives of humans at various stages of life. He recognized college students undergo a "normative 'identity crisis' [at] the age of adolescence and young adulthood" (p. 17).

Other psychologists have further expanded on this idea, recognizing identity development occurs through exploration and commitment. Marcia's theory of development recognizes how one actively seeks potential options before settling into an established sense of self (Ritchie et al., 2013). This process includes weighing "goals, values, and convictions," as well as already made choices and commitments (Luyckx, Goossens, & Soenens, 2006). Recent literature exploring these ideas recognizes the ways in which both exploration and commitment can be detrimental to developing a healthy identity. Young men and women may incorporate coping mechanisms in place of committing to an identity and moving towards adulthood. Risk taking, use of alcohol and drugs, and sexual promiscuity all represent some of the frequently used coping strategies in this population (Ritchie et al., 2013).

Concurrent with the identity crisis, late adolescence often corresponds with the intellectual phase of dualism. According to Perry, students in this phase treat knowledge

taught to them as truth. Educators hold the challenge of encouraging deeper levels of thought and knowledge by helping students strive for commitment in relativism, a phase marked by one's ability to recognize the role of opinion and perspective in knowledge and develop a personal worldview (Kloss, 1994). Students' abilities to move through Perry's four phases, in some ways, depend on their levels of active involvement in the learning process.

Astin's (1984) theory of "student involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 518). A student who spends more time on his academics in and out of the classroom will likely move through Perry's phases more readily (Kloss, 1994). In the same way, a student who takes advantage of social opportunities within the residence hall will feel more satisfaction in the whole of campus life (Astin, 1984). When a student cannot devote a large amount of time and energy to her undergraduate life due to a full-time job, family, or other commitments, identification with and satisfaction in the experience decreases (Astin, 1984). Students between the ages of 18 and 24 undergo huge growth in the process of relearning what it means to learn, discovering their identities, and attempting to engage with the institution at large (Astin, 1984; Kloss, 1994; Luyckx et al., 2006; Ritchie et al., 2013).

Institutional Support for Nontraditional Students

Furthermore, the ways in which an institution of higher education supports students plays an important role in the academic success of students and their perceptions of their experience as a whole. Institutional support exists in a multidimensional capacity spanning student affairs and academics. Harmon (2013) identified that "academic

advising, mentoring . . . orientation programs and courses, tutoring, as well as departmental interventions that specifically target . . . underrepresented students" fall under the umbrella of institutional support (p. 6). Offices or centers on campus serving various student groups in accordance to their needs represent the student affairs aspect of support. Research reveals the necessity of diverse and institution-wide support to promote student persistence, especially among students considered high-risk or nontraditional (Abrams & Jernigan, 1984; Bettinger et al., 2013; Cerven, 2013; Flores, 2014).

As previously noted, nontraditional students often navigate life in multiple roles. While many have familial obligations such as a spouse and/or children, others balance school with either full- or part-time employment. Moreover, the majority of these students commute to campus each day, possibly excluding them from engagement in the residential aspect of their institution (Robertson et al., 2012). In relation to these distinguishing characteristics, each student's motivation for enrolling in postsecondary education differs. Generally, these motivations contrast the motivations of traditional students who have fewer additional obligations competing with their educational responsibilities (Markle, 2015). In terms of appropriate student support, greater importance must be placed on understanding the ways nontraditional students' needs differ from those of their classmates.

Support in the classroom. Bettinger and colleagues (2013) acknowledged the correlation between classroom struggles and the way a student adjusts to life at a university. A student unable to meet expectations placed upon him or her by a professor, family member, or him or herself will likely experience self-doubt, less satisfaction, and

be more likely to drop out of his or her degree program (Bettinger et al., 2013). Institutions offer a variety of services to aid students academically. For students admitted as high-risk freshmen, remediation programs targeted at providing reading and vocabulary skills, as well as study tools and individual tutoring, have proven effective in retaining members of the at-risk population who chose to access services (Abrams & Jernigan, 1984). Additionally, support from faculty members functions as "a protective factor . . . against stress" for students (Çivitci, 2015, p. 566).

Abrams and Jernigan (1984) found the literature shows a "reluctance" of students to utilize available services and support at their institutions (p. 263). After knowledge of support services has been provided to students, those who chose to access the support demonstrated more success academically than did their peers who chose to forego support (Abrams & Jernigan, 1984). Additionally, when students with intrinsic motivation to seek support are paired with prepared, proactive advisors, student retention increases (Bettinger et al., 2013). Although a university may provide multiple support services, the anticipated benefits will not be seen if students do not utilize them.

Support outside the classroom. Nontraditional students need advocates on campus to raise commonly faced issues as well as fight for the success of all students (Darling, 2015). While students enroll in college with motivations to take courses that will benefit them in their current careers or allow them to move forward in their desired career path, education is neither isolated nor distinct from the rest of life. All students bring past experiences and current life situations with them to the classroom. Nontraditional students are not exempt, as they face multiple stressors unique to their experiences.

Many community colleges are well equipped to provide practical support to their nontraditional student population. Campuses provide a commuter-friendly atmosphere offering adequate parking, varied class times throughout the day and evening, and student life programming at convenient hours to be accessible to as many students as possible. Advisors and counselors at two-year institutions hold conversations regarding students' lives as much as they converse about academic scheduling due to the former informing the latter (Darling, 2015). Some campuses provide on-site childcare, which may help manage some of the stress that comes with balancing multiple roles (Cerven, 2013).

Because of the multiple roles many nontraditional students play, they often have difficulty financing their education. Less advantaged students often experience greater loan debt while less frequently completing their degree programs in comparison to other students (Flores, 2014). Many nontraditional students enroll in postsecondary education as a means of increasing financial stability. As students, they fit the criteria for low-income students. Students without financial stability are "almost three times more likely to leave without a degree" (Flores, 2014, p. 2). The independent status of most nontraditional students creates a greater appreciation of financial aid in them than in their classmates who might not be responsible for financing their own educations (Gault, Reichlin, & Roman, 2014). For working students, paying tuition may prove difficult depending on the payment schedules of the institution and employer. Though employees receive wages only upon completion of work, university tuition payment plans may not take this into account, requiring payment up front, perhaps before the student even has access to the funds (Bettinger et al., 2013).

Institutional Support for 18-24 Year Old Student-Parents

Robertson and colleagues (2012) studied the experiences of student-parents enrolled in undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral programs at a public, four-year institution in the Midwest. Their study presented three of the greatest inhibitors to education as areas of considerable concern: childcare, academics, and financial concerns. Some of the other concerns discovered related to housing, family services, work-life-school balance, and differing experiences (Robertson et al., 2012). Due to their status as parents, young adults straddle two developmental stages, thus requiring a spectrum of support to address the variety of needs. Those seeking to earn a four-year degree face the greatest challenges to academic persistence (Lovell, 2014).

Academic support for student-parents. One of the most influential spaces in the lives of student-parents is the classroom. Many student-parents feel inadequately equipped to navigate the student role without help from others. Cerven (2013) studied student-mothers having access to academic counselors who worked specifically with student-parents. These students felt better prepared to navigate the educational system upon meeting with their counselors when compared to meeting with general academic advisors who were unaware of their personal needs. These counselors also provided space to know the student-mothers as individuals, which functioned to relieve stress on a personal and academic scale (Cerven, 2013).

Student-parents spend the majority of their time on campus in the classroom interacting with faculty members. Interactions between students and faculty members largely influence student-parent retention rates. Students who feel unsupported by their professors may choose not to approach them with conflicts in their parenting role that

negatively impact their ability to perform well academically. Other students feel they have no option except to ask for flexibility from their professors (Branscomb, 2006). Instructors find themselves in positions of making decisions without a policy to guide them, consequently desiring more training in working with the specific needs of student-parents (Branscomb, 2006; Bussey, 2002).

Students with children request academic support that accounts for responsibilities of being a parent. A situation that surfaced frequently in the literature addresses the possibility of needing to care for a sick child or take a child to an appointment (Branscomb, 2006; Bussey, 2002; Medved & Heisler, 2002; Robertson et al., 2012; van Rhijn, 2014). Parents experience greater understanding from instructors who also have children than those who do not. These professors allowed deadlines to be adapted and course evaluations to be rescheduled in cases of emergencies, and they worked to support their students as persons (Branscomb, 2006; Medved & Heisler, 2002; Robertson et al., 2012). Student-parents denote higher levels of satisfaction when working with such professors.

Student-parents frequently request or note appreciation for more accessible class times. Due to the rigid structuring of courses at many universities, student-parents must decide whether they will place their role as a student before their role as a parent or vice versa. Some individuals do not have a choice and must limit the number of courses they take at a time in order to care for their child (van Rhijn, 2014), which may negatively impact the student financially by lengthening the course of education. Additionally, most students request the ability to be home with their family in the evening and are again

limited by avoiding night courses or exams. Students place high value on the ability to establish an evening routine with their families (Robertson et al., 2012; van Rhijn, 2014).

Student services for student-parents. Research shows that several support services available through the university decrease the levels of stress student-parents feel in various aspects of life. Accessible, affordable, and flexible childcare tops the list of desired services (Bussey, 2002; Cerven, 2013; Lovell, 2014; Moreau & Kerner, 2012; Robertson et al., 2012). While most parents feel capable of locating childcare during the day, they see a need for childcare that offers evening care or drop-in hours at an affordable rate. Student-parents raising children on their own request these flexible services at higher rates than married or cohabitating parents (Robertson et al., 2012).

Students with children recognize the need for more affordable housing located on or near campus. Many graduate students note this as an area requiring improvement, despite having an easier time accessing affordable family housing when compared to undergraduate students raising a child on their own. These younger students are less likely to enter school with a stable full- or part-time job or a partner who works full time (Robertson et al., 2012). Not surprisingly, many undergraduate students with children struggle with financial stability. Quality of living decreases as finances decrease, meaning many student-parents must decide how to prioritize their money when caring for a family, financing their education, and meeting other demands of life (Robertson et al., 2012).

Beyond the tangible support services institutions can offer to student-parents, many students desire opportunities for connection. Students with children possess the same desire to interact with their peers outside of the classroom, both with and without

their children. Students feel excluded due to the majority of campus programs being scheduled in the evening (van Rhijn, 2014). Additionally, student-parents desire increased opportunities to connect with other student-parents on campus. These individuals "reported feeling isolated and socially excluded" as well as desiring relationships with others who understand their life situation (van Rhijn, 2014, p. 5).

Connections with peers may be able to offer some comfort for students with children as they balance various roles in life. This role conflict has also been shown to decrease when opportunities for counseling are available (Cerven, 2013). By creating more opportunities for student-parents to process their experiences, these individuals may feel better understood and supported by campus staff who not only listen to their needs but help them find solutions. Counselors should be trained to understand the specific needs of the student-parent population in order to make these services most effective (Cerven, 2013; van Rhijn, 2014).

In conclusion, studies reveal common needs of all students with children that could be better served by institutions of higher education. However, research fails to address the needs specific to undergraduate student-parents between the ages of 18 and 24. The literature significantly notes that, when not supported by the institution, the undergraduate student-parent population faces the greatest risk of drop out (Lovell, 2014). Through careful study of current literature regarding student-parents and recognizing the specific developmental needs of the traditional-aged college student, the present study sought to understand the ways institutions throughout the United States publicly support this population.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Current literature reveals a need to support better the student-parents in higher education (de Oliveira Urpia & da Rocha Sampaio, 2012; Gonchar, 1995; Medved & Heisler, 2002; Robertson et al., 2012; van Rhijn, 2014). The 18- to 24-year-old undergraduate student-parent enrolled in a four-year institution holds the highest risk for dropout (Lovell, 2014). Although institutions may provide support services, the knowledge and accessibility of such services may not be recognized by student-parents (Abrams & Jernigan, 1984; Robertson et al., 2012). Minimal literature focuses on this specific population and existing institutional supports, revealing a need for further study.

Approach and Design

A qualitative collective case study was utilized to examine institutional websites and better understand what support they offered to student-parents. Creswell (2013) stated that a case study occurs within a "real-life, contemporary bounded system or multiple bounded systems" and involves "multiple sources of information" (p. 97). In the current study, a multisite approach examined institutional websites to explore the ways in which various postsecondary institutions across the United States support student-parents.

A document analysis of randomly selected, publicly available web pages revealed quantifiable data of support offered by various institutions. Document analysis is "a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents . . . in order to elicit

meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge" (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). The study revealed what institutions offer in terms of support to parents on their campuses, what support exists that may benefit—though is not distinct to—student-parents, and where support is lacking on the college and university campus.

Participants

The study examined 50 randomly selected institutions, ten institutions from five categories, as classified by The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education: (1) Doctoral Universities: Highest Research Activities; (2) Master's Colleges and Universities: Larger Programs; (3) Baccalaureate Colleges: Diverse Fields; (4) Baccalaureate/Associate's Colleges: Mixed Baccalaureate/Associate's; and (5) Associate's Colleges: High-Transfer Mixed Traditional/Nontraditional (Indiana University School of Education, 2017). Each category was further filtered to "City Midsize" in order to ensure institutions were located in areas with comparable outside resources. All 50 institutions provided publicly available documents through their websites, both directly and indirectly, through the utilization of online search engines.

Procedures

Utilizing the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, the researcher developed a data collection protocol (Appendix A) to ensure each of the 50 institutional websites were reviewed in the same manner. This two-part protocol consisted of, first, a general search utilizing an online search engine, and second, a series of prompts to search each web page directly. All data was collected and stored by the researcher in offline, PDF file format organized according to institution name and categorization. Next, the researcher

examined the data for general themes and established guiding questions for further analysis of the data (Appendix B).

Data Analysis

Upon collecting information from each web page, the researcher reviewed the data to generate five themes in the form of framing questions by which to make further sense of the data (Appendix B). Utilizing these questions, the researcher explored the data to record frequencies by theme. For each institution and classification, the researcher recorded frequency of specific support services described on institutional web pages. The researcher also recorded frequency of various support services offered by the institutions to undergraduate student-parents, graduate students-parents, and employees with children. Lastly, the research recorded frequencies of different types of financial aid as denoted by either the financial aid section of institutions' websites or specific pages for student-parents/students with families.

Anticipated Benefits

There are several potential benefits of conducting the research outlined above. First, higher education practitioners will better understand current support services offered in attempts to meet the needs of student-parents on their campuses. Additionally, professionals will be able to assess more effectively whether the online presence of support matches that which actually exists at an institution. Finally, greater recognition of the need for thorough, easy-to-navigate institutional web pages may ensure current and future students have access to support services offered by an institution.

Chapter 4

Results

The process of gathering, reviewing, and analyzing the data from publicly available institutional websites yielded tangible results, helpful in understanding the amount and nature of support various types of institutions around the United States offer to student-parents. Data analysis sheds light on the types of institutions offering a variety of support services, as well as insight into the nature of those services. Additionally, the analysis distinguishes whether or not support services at an institution are utilized to care for undergraduate student-parents or other parents on campuses.

On-Campus Support Services

The researcher read through the documents collected from all 50 institutions and established a series of five questions, or themes. The first of these questions asks: What, if any, student support services/offices are available (e.g., academic support, disability support, child care, counseling services)? Many different types and services of support are represented on institutional websites. From this theme, the documents collected from each institution were reviewed and coded according to support services offered. Table 1 shows the frequencies of services provided, categorized by institution classification. It should be noted that not all support offices of the sample population were tallied, but only those that were collected based on the research protocol as outlined in Appendix A.

Housing Options

The second framing question asks of the data: What, if any, housing options are available for student-parents/students with families (e.g., on-campus housing, off-campus housing assistance)? As with the previous theme, this question was asked of each institution, and frequencies were recorded according to institution classifications in Table 1. Fewer institutions provided support in terms of housing than they did in other areas of student life.

Table 1

Student Support Services/Offices and Housing Available

Service	Institution Type					
	Doctoral	Masters	Baccalaureate	Baccalaureate-Associates	Associates	**Total**
Academic Support Center	10	10	8	6	10	**34**
Tutoring	10	10	6	6	10	**32**
Health Services	10	7	5	0	4	**26**
Health Insurance for Dependents	4	1	1	0	1	**7**
Counseling Services	10	8	7	0	10	**35**
First Generation Student Services	8	3	0	1	6	**18**
International Student Services	10	8	2	2	4	**26**
Multicultural Student Services	10	4	3	1	3	**21**
LGBTQ+ Student Services	10	4	2	0	2	**18**
Disability/Accessibility Services	10	10	8	5	10	**13**
Women's Resources	7	3	1	0	2	**43**
Nontraditional Student Services	5	4	4	10	10	**33**
Student's With Families/Children	5	2	2	0	0	**7**
Child Care	10	4	3	1	7	**25**
Family Housing	6	1	0	0	0	**7**
Off Campus Housing Assistance	9	0	2	3	2	**16**

Financial Assistance

Third, the theme of financial support arose from the data, and the following question was developed: What, if any, specific financial aid options are available to student-parents, including, but not limited to, child care subsidies, scholarships, and/or tuition discounts? Once again, documents from all 50 institutions were analyzed, and the

results according to type of financial support are outlined in Table 2. Many, but not all, of these financial aid options required the student-parent to be accepted to or participate in a specific program on campus in order to receive financial benefits. Other financial options included outside funding listed on the institution's web page and were not guaranteed to student-parents.

Table 2

Specific Financial Aid Options Available to Student-Parents

Types	Number of Institutions
Scholarships	5
Child Care Tuition Discounts	4
Child Care Subsidy	10
Grant	3
Emergency Funds	2

Who Receives Support

The fourth theme that arose from the data suggested that not all institutions with support for parents or children made the support available to undergraduate student-parents. The following question was developed in order to understand in greater detail what the documents revealed: For which constituents— faculty, staff, undergraduate students, graduate students, alumni, and community members, if any—is support for parents offered (e.g., employee benefits, child care enrollment options, "Students with Families" offices, lactation rooms)? The data in Table 3 shows which campus constituents are eligible to use three specific resources at their respective institutions.

Some documents from departments of human resources were collected by following the research protocol, and these resources were expressly reserved for employees of the institution. Other institutions provided resources to both employees as well as students, with many campus child care facilities designating which constituents received priority over others.

Table 3

Parenting Resources Available to Campus Constituents

Resource	Constituent Types				
	Faculty/Staff	Graduate	Undergraduate	Community	Alumni
Family & Children Resources	19	10	7	—	—
Child Care	25	23	20	18	1
Lactation Rooms	17	12	12	—	—

Other Considerations

The final theme that arose from an initial review of the documents asked: What, if any, other considerations for student-parents are suggested by the data (e.g., policies, health insurance, parenting resources)? While both health insurance and parenting resources emerged from the data in previous themes, one other consideration did appear. One Baccalaureate-Associate's institution clearly stated a policy prohibiting the presence of children on the campus. According to the Student Conduct Policy, it is considered a violation to bring "children into the Institution's academic areas. The Institution does not provide childcare services and cannot assume responsibility for children's health and safety." This policy was noteworthy due to being the only institution to offer a written

policy for student-parents to refer to when considering childcare options for children while attending classes.

From the five themes—support services, housing options, financial aid options, support for various constituents, and other considerations—clarity of how student-parents are or are not supported by their institutions emerges. Utilizing publicly available resources to determine frequencies of support, led to observations concerning which classifications of institutions appear to offer more comprehensive support and which classifications seemingly offer less support to their students. According to Table 1, doctoral institutions tend to offer more support to students than do the other classifications. However, noting that not all studied institutions operate residentially proves important. In other words, some support services are only utilized online, making some types of support unnecessary for the institution's operating model.

Chapter 5

Discussion

A review of publicly available data from a sample population of 50 postsecondary institutions in the United States revealed a stark image of the support available to student-parents on their campuses. By collecting documents from each of the institutions and analyzing them for themes, the data suggests support for student-parents exists in four key categories: structured support services and offices through the institution; housing options or assistance to locate off-campus housing; specific financial aid options for student-parents; and the availability of campus resources to both employees and students of the institution.

As noted previously, several specific areas of support have been shown to reduce stress levels of student-parents. Bussey (2002), Cerven (2013), and Robertson et al. (2012), among others, stated students with children highly prioritize access to affordable, accessible, and flexible childcare. Findings from the current study reveal that only 20 out of 50 institutions offer or are in partnership with childcare providers available for undergraduate student use. While 14 of these institutions also provide either a childcare subsidy or childcare tuition discounts to student-parents, not all providers list tuition on their websites. Additionally, it was beyond the scope of the study to address the hours and flexibility of childcare providers, which student-parents who may be required to take

evening courses or need only a few hours of care rather than a full or half-day deem important (Lovell, 2014; Moreau & Kerner, 2012; Robertson et al., 2012).

Robertson et al. (2012) found that financial concerns ranked third on a list of problems faced by student-parents. The present study demonstrated that few specific options exist to offset the financial burden of the parent's education as well as the cost of raising a family. In fact, only 24 specific financial aid options existed at 50 institutions, and not all 24 options are from separate institutions. Of these specific options, 14 of the 24 relate directly to offsetting the cost of childcare, 8 are awarded as scholarships and grants, and the remaining 2 are reserved as emergency funds for struggling students at the institution. More traditional financial aid resources are also available at these 50 institutions, including loans, grants, and merit- and need-based scholarships. Flores (2014) stated students from less advantaged backgrounds are more likely to incur greater loan debt than their peers. Additionally, Robertson et al. (2012) found that lower income households had fewer money management skills than higher income and married households. Providing students financial aid without education to manage the funds may be inadequate in terms of holistic support.

Housing is another key area of concern for student-parents. As evidenced in the current study, only 7 of the studied 50 institutions offer family housing on their campuses, and only 16 institutions provide resources for finding housing in the local community. Many student-parents have difficulty finding housing that is affordable and close to campus, with undergraduate student-parents having a significantly harder time than graduate student-parents (Robertson et al., 2012). Additionally, the study found that many schools not offering family housing or off-campus housing assistance also had

strict residency requirements for undergraduate students. According to the web pages, only students with the earned credits of a senior, married students, or students living with their parents/guardians would be allowed to live off-campus. Despite what accommodations may be made for student-parents interested in pursuing an education at these institutions, the language online demonstrates an inflexible requirement.

Research shows students with adequate academic support through services such as individualized tutoring and personalized advising experience reduced stress levels (Abrams & Jernigan, 1984; Bettinger et al., 2013; Çivitci, 2015). The current study demonstrated that, of the 14 support service areas documented, academic support centers and tutoring were among the top 4 services identified at institutions. Academic support centers appeared in the data at 34 of the 50 institutions, and tutoring was visible at 32 institutions. Cerven (2013) found student-parents who met with academic counselors trained to work specifically with the student-parent population felt more prepared to navigate their academics than when they met with traditional advisors. The document analysis for the study revealed no specially trained advisors or counselors serve student-parents at the sample of institutions.

While no specific academic counselors were identified by the data, the operation of focused resource centers for student with families or students with children did not emerge when reviewing available literature. Though only present at seven institutions, such centers have the opportunity to serve the student-parent population in more specific and helpful ways. One such center uses language such as “provide resources,” “advocate,” and “collaborate” when stating how it aids students. Offered resources might include information regarding lactation rooms on campus, childcare, and surrounding

communities. This active resource may help student-parents connect with other resource areas to ease their burden of balancing life roles that sometimes conflict.

A final consideration from the results of the study focuses on the ease of access to information provided by institutions online. As all the data was collected via publicly available resources, both current and prospective students alike may utilize these web pages. Access to specific resources should be available not only through use of a search engine and key terms, but also through an easily navigable series of links on the institution's website. Should student-parents not know where to find information regarding childcare, lactation rooms, family housing assistance, or other support services, they may be inclined to believe it does not exist regardless of the physical reality of such resources on campus. The perception of support available to student-parents is perhaps just as important as the actual presence of support at an institution.

Implications for Practice

The presented research offers several implications for practice when looking to better support student-parents and the wider student population. First, institutions ought to review their online presence and navigate their own web page, searching for key resources. If information cannot be found or is only accessible by an embedded hyperlink in one area of the website, students may not know support exists.

Second, parent and family support services for employees and graduate students are present on many campuses, but some are exclusive to these populations. Providing support for undergraduate student-parents as well may diversify the demographics of students applying to the institution and increase retention of students finding themselves starting families during their undergraduate educational careers. This support could be

offered in various forms depending on the extent of services already offered by the institution, including posting locations of on-campus lactation rooms, using the already established information from human resource offices to create a web page outlining support for all parents, or establishing a physical office on campus where student-parents can find support.

A third recommendation for practitioners depends on the type of institution at which they work. The data suggests that doctoral institutions provide the most encompassing support to student-parents while baccalaureate and baccalaureate-associate's institutions more frequently lack services. Administrators should consider the changing demographic of higher education and consider preparing their unique campuses to serve new and growing populations of students before student needs outgrow corresponding resources. For example, institutions can be prepared to support student-parents desiring to study there by changing the language surrounding residency requirements and partnering with local childcare facilities.

Lastly, if institutions feel they do not have the monetary or physical resources to provide further support, the researcher recommends they identify a faculty or staff member on campus who can assist any student-parents who may require support. This individual can bear the title "Coordinator of Student-Parent Support" or an equivalent. As identified by the data, having any support for this population when searching online can increase the perceived support of a student-parent inquiring about services.

Implications for Future Research

The present study provides researchers and practitioners with a glimpse of how various institutions support undergraduate student-parents. Future research should

consider reviewing more than documents to assess what support operates on the ground at institutions, seeking to determine whether or not there is a disconnect between what institutions claim online and what they practice. Alternatively, future research could evaluate student perceptions, striving to understand the degrees to which undergraduate student-parents feel supported by their institutions. As noted by Abrams and Jernigan (1984) in regards to academic support, the mere presence of support on a campus does not guarantee that students will utilize it. Research to understand what support exists on a campus and how undergraduate student-parents feel supported by their institution would provide greater clarity to the literature.

Finally, the researcher recommends further research regarding academic and campus policies for students with children. The present study intentionally did not include student handbooks in the analysis due to the vast amount of data already being analyzed. However, the literature suggests confusion surrounding academic policies for student-parents who must care for a sick child or when childcare falls through (Branscomb, 2006; Bussey, 2002; Medved & Heisler, 2002; Robertson et al., 2012; van Rhijn, 2014). Though such policies often exist internally—in human resources guides or student handbooks—approaching institutions requesting access to formal policies concerning nonthreatening areas like student support might yield a wealth of helpful information.

Limitations

Several limitations exist within the present study. First and foremost, researcher bias always exists despite best efforts to remain objective. After the protocols were created, each protocol, along with the initial themes, was reviewed by other researchers

before the study continued. Second, because this study only looked at publicly available data provided by institutions on their web pages, the information may be skewed. Support may exist that is only visible on an institution's internal portal. The researcher discovered this limitation predominantly when seeking to understand class times and scheduling flexibility for student-parents. Such information was rarely available to the public and, thus, was removed from any results. Finally, because each institution designs their web pages differently, it was impossible to follow the exact same protocol for each institution despite all efforts taken to ensure consistency in the data collection process.

Conclusion

Previous research accounts for the experiences of graduate student-parents and opportunities to support this population better. However, the literature is lacking concerning what support is needed by and provided to traditional-aged, undergraduate student-parents pursuing a degree at an institution in the United States. The study sought to provide a glimpse of what support is offered to undergraduate student-parents by analyzing publicly available documents on 50 institutions' web pages. The data suggests that, while support in key areas such as housing, financial aid, and childcare does exist, it could exist in greater frequency at a wider range of institutions. By expanding the support offered to undergraduate student-parents and ensuring that the support advertised matches the available support, increasing the numbers of nontraditional students—such as student-parents—will be better supported in future generations.

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Appendix A

Online Data Collection Protocol

Search Engine Protocol:

1) "institution name" students with dependent children
2) "institution name" child care services
3) "institution name" family housing options
4) "institution name" students with families
5) "institution name" financial aid for students with dependents
6) "institution name" student support services

Institutional Web Page Protocol:

1) Choose "Student Life" or equivalent option
    a. Choose "Housing," "Residence Life," or equivalent option
        i. Look for "Married and Family Housing" information
2) Choose "Student Support Services" or equivalent option
    a. Look for options such as "Academic Support Services," "Child Care," "Financial Aid," and similar areas of support.
3) Choose "Admission" or equivalent option
    a. Look for "Financial Aid" or equivalent option
4) Choose "Academics" or equivalent option
    a. Look for "Academic Support Services," "Registrar," and similar areas of support
5) From main webpage, choose any link that relates to support that could impact student-parents

Appendix B

Data Analysis Framing Questions

1) What, if any, student support services/offices are available (e.g. academic support, disability support, child care, counseling services, etc.)?
2) What, if any, housing options are available for student-parents/students with families (e.g. on-campus housing, off-campus housing assistance, etc.)?
3) What, if any, specific financial aid options are available to student-parents including but not limited to child care subsidies, scholarships, and/or tuition discounts?
4) For which constituents— faculty, staff, undergraduate students, graduate students, alumni, and community members, if any—is support for parents offered (e.g. employee benefits, child care enrollment options, "Students with Families" offices, lactation rooms, etc.)?
5) What, if any, other considerations for student-parents are suggested by the data (e.g. policies, health insurance, parenting resources, etc.)?