

Community college childcare: Promoting success across the generations

By Lisa Strahley and Barbara Ann Nilsen

A large percentage, 29%, of Community College students are parent students with 14% being single parents. Many of these single parent students live in poverty (Miller 7) and report that financial challenges are likely to cause them to drop-out of college (Miller 13).

Almost half of parent students work full-time in addition to attending college. Studies have shown that for parent students both access and persistence are linked to the availability of childcare (Miller 14).

Quality early childcare also has long lasting benefits to society. Studies show that exposure to high quality early care experiences reduce special education placements by 49% and grade retention by 50%. Child abuse and neglect incidences decrease by 51% and juvenile arrests decrease by 33%. In addition, high school graduation, college attendance and employment rates rise (Stauffer).

Twenty nine of the thirty one SUNY community colleges have childcare centers, some on more than one campus.

Top Ten Reasons for Campus Childcare

Here are ten good reasons – their level of importance will vary depending on the reader's perspective. They are all important!

STUDENT RETENTION Students who are parents are three times as likely as traditional undergraduates to drop out because of the stresses of managing school work, home life, many times a part or full-time job, plus caregiving of children. Campus childcare can reduce the stress and thereby increase student retention- and completion rates (Stauffer).

STUDENT SERVICE First generation, ethnic minority, single parents and part-time students have fewer family supports. Campuses that recognize and address the needs of students provide on-campus services to support their learning. Campus childcare is one of those important services.

AFFORDABLE CARE Costly off-campus care centers are often beyond the reach of economically challenged students so subsidized campus childcare assists the student in accessing affordable care.

FIELD SITES Campus childcare that collaborates with early childhood and teacher education academic programs on campus provide convenient and coordinated field sites for child observation and field practice in a quality-controlled setting.

CLINICAL SITES Campus childcare also provides opportunities for students in many other curriculums such as nursing, dental hygiene, art, music, theater, and psychology to apply concepts from their academic studies.

DEMONSTRATION CLASSROOMS Campus childcare centers can serve as exemplars to the community of quality child education, demonstrating best practices and advocating for quality in the community.

TWO-GENERATION STRATEGY Children who are the recipients of quality early childhood education in campus childcare centers begin the educational pipeline with a focus on learning and opportunity.

CAMPUS CULTURE OF CARING Having young children visible on campus exemplifies to all students, faculty, staff and visitors that this institution cares for its youngest citizens, giving a kinder, gentler atmosphere as the children walk about and exchange smiles with those they meet along the way.

PROVIDES WORK STUDY OPPORTUNITIES Campus childcare may provide meaningful work study jobs that raises self-esteem and may be career exploration.

SOCIAL NETWORK FOR STUDENT PARENTS As student parents participate in the campus childcare day and functions, they support one another, understanding the unique situation that they share. The center also recognizes and supports their scheduling needs and the peak stress times of mid-term and finals that do not coincide with community-based parents.

YES, BUT...

As important as those reasons are to student success, providing accessible, affordable, quality childcare on campus is not without its challenges. The greatest challenge is that of funding.

Campus childcare that pays a living wage to its qualified teachers and makes the care affordable to students cannot fiscally operate on parent tuitions, the declining SUNY campus childcare grant, and small fundraisers. It requires substantial college support and outside funding that recognizes and values the importance of quality childcare to student success. Maintaining fiscal stability with decreasing support systems may result in centers having to make operating decisions such as hiring part-time staff or hiring professionals with lesser degrees just to save money yet ultimately compromising the overall quality of care offered to children.

When campus childcare is under a separate strand such as Student Services or is outsourced to a community-based agency, there can be a disconnect between the academic early childhood program and the center regarding curriculum and best practices. Occasionally that is so disparate that early childhood students cannot even use it for field experiences because of the philosophical differences. It is important that there is a strong connection or even oversight by the academic early childhood program so this does not happen. In the community's eyes, they are one and the same and a poor quality center reflects on the program and the institution.

Many centers lack the capacity to serve the demand for care, resulting in some students having a year or longer wait to get in-to the childcare center and consequently delaying -college. In part, the limited number of slots may be because some centers resort to increasing the percent of slots allotted to faculty/staff and community in order to generate more income.

In addition to tuition, the cost of childcare is an added fiscal burden on student parents, in some circumstances consuming much of their monthly family budget. Although the SUNY Operating

Grant which covers expenses such as staff develop, classroom materials and staff salaries, has increased over the past 5 years by approximately \$500,000, the SUNY Block Grant which supports funding for student parent childcare expenses has decreased by approximately \$900,000 in the same time period.

How Can Campuses Meet the Challenge?

Some possible ways that an institution can support student parents:

- An advisor who is designated as Childcare Support that assists students in placements in the campus childcare center or in referrals to a community childcare center that can meet the student parent's needs.
- Engage the college Foundation in setting up a reserve account to underwrite the operating costs of campus childcare services, perhaps with an annual campaign targeting alumni who used the center themselves and are now in successful careers, faculty who understand the importance of the service for students, and unions to support the faculty and staff parents who may use the center.
- Apply for local, state and federal subsidies, grants and earmarks to underwrite the campus childcare program.
- Childcare center staff who supervise student field work at the site can have partial loads under the college administration budget.
- Advocate for county social services to further assist student parents.
- Prioritize funding allocations within SUNY that support student parents.

With all the powerful reasons for campus childcare, SUNY should set a high priority in supporting student parents as an investment not only in the present students but those young children who are benefitting from campus childcare. They are in pipeline toward success. Let's start the dialog and take action toward this goal.

References

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