December 2017

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Recommended Citation

Squires, V., & Disano, J. (2017). Painting a picture: Understanding our student parent profile on campus. *Journal of Global Education and Research, 1*(1), 1-8. doi:10.5038/2577-509X.1.1.1004

Painting a Picture: Understanding Our Student Parent Profile on Campus

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Abstract

Little information or research exists regarding the profile of student parents on campus even though increasingly more non-traditional and mature students access post-secondary education. This study presents information generated through a telephone survey of students conducted by a research lab on one Canadian campus. The purpose of the research was to uncover more information about this student group with the intent that the data would inform the development of guidelines for allocation of additional childcare spaces on campus as soon as a new childcare centre was completed. Better information on their needs as students and parents would be helpful in determining the needs of this particular population on campus. The study was located within the research on access and persistence of post-secondary students and used a pragmatist worldview whereby the research approach that is taken best meets the criteria for the project.

Keywords: postsecondary student parents, diverse student needs, student persistence, higher education

Introduction

The student population of campuses has become increasingly diverse over the past few decades (Hendrickson, Lane, Harris, & Dorman, 2013; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2010; Kuk, Banning, & Amey, 2010; Light, 2001; McGrath, 2010). Mueller (2008) emphasized that non-traditional students are making up an increasing proportion of students on campus. Brown and Nichols (2012) concurred, stating "over the past three decades (1971 – 2000), the rate of adult students entering postsecondary education tripled while the rate of students 24 years or younger increased by only 51%" (p. 500). Among this diverse population are mature students who are choosing to pursue post-secondary education (PSE) for the first time or for the purposes of continuing their academic journey. Because they are mature students, some of them have children (Brown & Nichols, 2012) and this responsibility can become an added challenge for students who juggle family needs with academic and financial commitments (Silva-Ford, 2014). Although there is the question of whether universities should be in the business of childcare and arguably could have no vested interest in establishing childcare (Kuk et al., 2010), providing at least the structure or space for services on campus can improve access for student parents and support student retention (Brown & Nichols, 2012). There are some positive examples of childcare on campuses, but they are not widespread models (Farrington, 2007; Kuh et al., 2010).

Frequently, student parents make other arrangements with family and neighbours (Silva-Ford, 2014). The number of student parents on campus and their particular needs are not well-understood.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the research undertaken by one Canadian university to better understand student parents on its campus and to advocate for further research into understanding the needs of mature students in PSE. The paper will focus on a telephone survey conducted with a representative sample of the student population and will highlight the results that informed the construction of guidelines for distribution of new childcare spaces on the campus.

Literature Review
While specific programs and legislation establishing supports for postsecondary student parents in the United States have been noted in some studies, research and literature on this group of students are sparse (Brown & Nichols, 2012). Furthermore, in Canada, research must consider the provincial context, located within the larger federal student loan and grants programs (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2008). As Andres and Adamuti-Trache (2008) noted, implementation of financial support policies "requires adequate student services within post-secondary institutions to assist students who have difficulties in planning their way through the system in terms of academic and financial need, but also in relation to their career and life course plans" (p. 269), and these supports should include robust counselling services. They contended that a broad range of life choices including marriage and parenting affected students' academic trajectories and could extend timelines for degree completion.

Researchers have investigated access and persistence in PSE in the last three decades; however, these issues are "conceptually and empirically complex" (Finnie, Sweetman, & Usher, 2008, p. 6). Finnie et al. (2008) proposed a model that incorporated many broad categories of factors related to post-secondary students' access and persistence. These factors can be interrelated; for example, family background and financial supports can be considered separately or together based on individual cases (Finnie et al., 2008). The provision of childcare services, when situated within this model, highlights this interrelatedness in that quality, affordable childcare with easy access could alleviate stress and address multiple factors within Finnie et al.'s model.

The model portrays the complexities of access and persistence for postsecondary students. Family background, high school success and experiences can set up a student for accessing postsecondary, whereas persistence and completion in postsecondary are influenced by a number of factors including finances, motivation and preparation, as well as experiences, grades, satisfaction and engagement. For students who are parents, family responsibilities can have an impact on several factors within this model; given these additional stresses, targeted supports for this group should be considered in addressing retention of student parents on campus.

Background to the Study
One Canadian university had an urgent need to better understand the student parent demographic. At this university, two established childcare centres were operating in space leased from the university; collectively, 90 spots were available. The student union on campus lobbied for more spaces to address what they perceived as an overwhelming need for childcare. As the

university considered options for expansion, the administration expressed a desire to understand the student parent demographic better in order to guide decision-making around access to the emergent childcare spots. The research question regarding who the student parents were could be addressed using quantitative data to construct a more detailed picture of student parents on campus.

The Childcare Expansion Committee (CEC) first conducted an environmental scan of childcare across Canadian universities, and within the province itself. Education is under provincial jurisdiction in Canada, and, as such, there can be fundamental differences in policy and practice across provinces (Beach, Boadway, & McInnis, 2005; Trilokekar, Shanahan, Axelrod, & Wellen, 2013). The committee found that there was, indeed, a broad range of childcare provision on campuses across the country. As with most other provinces, this province's Ministry of Education subsidized childcare spaces in licensed childcare centres; the amount of the subsidy depended on the financial needs of the parent(s) or caregiver.

The CEC then contracted with a research lab on campus to conduct a telephone survey and collect quantitative data regarding their student parents. The university wanted to understand the extent of childcare needed, the qualities of childcare in which student parents were interested, and demographic information. The committee believed, based on previous institutional surveys, that Aboriginal and graduate students, in particular, were underserved.

Methods

Because the purpose of the study was to generate data to inform policy and decisions, this study utilizes a pragmatist approach. Pragmatism is a practical approach that allows researchers to be practice-focused while attempting to solve a particular problem (Creswell, 2014). Pragmatism supports the use of research methods and techniques that are appropriate to the study and the research question itself (Creswell, 2014). According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2010), pragmatism is "problem centered" and "practice-oriented" (p. 22). Pragmatists look at the "what" and the "how" and the intended consequences of the research (Creswell, 2014). The rationale for the research and how the data would be used are important underpinnings of pragmatist research. In this study, the research was undertaken to serve a larger educational purpose, that is, the development of policy around supports for students and around responsible resource allocation. As Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2011) suggested, policymakers like unequivocal data to support decision making. Although the data on numbers of student parents and ranking of preferred qualities of childcare facilities provided statistics for decision making in this study, there were opportunities to share qualitative information such as personal stories regarding the impact of family responsibilities on access and persistence in postsecondary education. These anecdotes helped to `backing` a case for pursuing more supports for student parents.

Research Methods

For this study, the researchers used a primarily quantitative research design, specifically a survey approach. Creswell (2014) stated that survey research "provides a quantitative or numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population" (p. 13). However, there were several open-ended questions within the survey that allowed for opinions and anecdotes to be shared with the researchers. This research design is in

keeping with the pragmatic approach, whereby the chosen method is that approach which will provide the best data to answer the research question (Creswell, 2014).

Two members of the CEC and the research lab's director and manager constructed a survey protocol to elicit the types of information sought by the committee. Initial survey screening questions were developed to identify student parents and non-parents, in order to screen non-parents from the survey. Among the student parents, basic demographic information was elicited on the numbers of children in their care, in addition to other pertinent demographic information, such as age(s) of the child(ren), marital status and existing childcare arrangements. Follow-up questions were presented to identify means of transportation to childcare and campus, most desired characteristics in childcare (i.e., proximity, cost, licensed), while additional questions sought to identify issues related to childcare cost sensitivity.

Upon receiving approval from the institutional Behavioral Research Ethics Board, telephone contact information for all current students (n = 21,071) was obtained. This process uncovered the fact that some students, particularly international students, had not updated their telephone contact information upon arriving on campus. Despite several communications sent to students to encourage them to update their contact information, this issue was not fully resolved. As a result, 1,055 records (or 5%) were removed from the original database, leaving 20,016 sample records available for dialing.

Data Sources

Communication was sent to the campus community to raise awareness regarding the nature and intent of the survey. Training sessions for student research assistants working in the telephone survey lab were held prior to their first shift. They then phoned graduate and undergraduate students and conducted verbal surveys over a two-week period from October 17 – 30, 2013. Of the 20,016 sample records available for dialing, the survey lab called 17,330 students based on pre-established dialing rules that prioritize call-backs to previously called numbers over never called *fresh sample*. Contact was successfully established with 9,506 students. Because the CEC was especially interested in four subgroups of the student population, quotas were established for undergraduate students (n = 376), graduate students (n = 338), non-degree students (n = 202), and international students (n = 318). Additionally, unregulated quotas were established to track numbers of Aboriginal student respondents; as with the exception of international students, Aboriginal students could theoretically fall into any of the other aforementioned quota categories. At the time of the study, undergraduate students comprised approximately 81% of the university's population, while graduate students made up 15%, with post-graduate clinical students and non-degree students making up the remainder. Additionally, 9% of the population were Aboriginal students (91% undergraduate, 9% graduate). International students made up 11% (54% undergraduate, 46% graduate) (institutional report). Unfortunately, the team did not meet our quota of international students (58 of 318 or 18% of quota target); incorrect contact information and language barriers were contributing factors in not achieving that quota. The survey, overall, yielded a response rate of 33.3%.

Once the survey closed, the research lab analyzed the data using SPSS, producing cross tabulations for each of the survey question variables by the aforementioned quota groups, in addition to other pertinent demographic data (i.e., age, sex, proximity to campus). Analysis of

variance (ANOVA) and chi-square tests was performed to test significance and differences of means. The researchers then constructed an institutional report and presented it to the CEC in January 2014.

Findings

Of the successful contacts, 787 were student parents. A subset of this parenting group (n = 112, 14%) had children 12 years of age and older with the remaining majority (n = 675, 86%) parenting younger children potentially in need of care. Of this subset, 32% were male respondents and 68% were female. From this sample, we can make a cautious extrapolation that approximately 8% of our students are parents (±3.71% margin of error; we can expect these results 19 times out of 20). We can further determine more information about particular demographic groups, as shown in the following table.

Table 1: Student Parent Demographics

Target Group	Population on Campus (Fall Census Data)	Number of Parents Contacted	Aboriginal Student Parents	Percent of Student Parent Population
Undergraduate	16,962	399	124	59
Graduate	3,116	239	17	35
Non-degree	544	37	1	6
International	1,925	58		9
Total	20,622	675	142	100

It is worth noting that we believe international students are underrepresented in this sample, in part because some of them had not updated their contact information, and in part because it was a verbal survey conducted over the phone, which is especially problematic if other household members had very little English. The following table examines the percentage of parents that fall within the demographic groups and the number of children represented within that group.

Table 2: Demographic Comparisons

Group	Percent of Total Student Parents	Percent of Total Number of Children
Undergraduate	59	64
Graduate	35	38
Aboriginal	21	26
International	9	9

Approximately 48% of the student parents had only one child; a further 34% had two children. However, there were some families with more children, including 12 families who had 5 or more children. The following table breaks down the 1,121 children of student parents into different age categories.

Table 3: Ages of Children

Age	Number of Children in Age Group
Under 1	121
1 year old	84
2 years old	110
3 years old	125
4 years old	101
5 years old	108
6 years old	85
7 years old or older	474

Currently, 32% of the student parents take their children to childcare centres while 16% access childcare in private homes. In addition, 11% of the student parents had grandparents providing childcare and another 13% had other family members providing care. While the majority of students (65%) had family and friends who supported them, at least occasionally, only 38% of the international students relied on that type of support. Overall, the primary methods of transportation that student parents used to take their children to care are: by car (63%), by bus (6%), and walking (6%). Fewer international students (53%) used the car as their method of taking children to child care.

When prompted to identify all the characteristics of childcare that were important to them, student parents chose the following five characteristics (in descending order from most frequently chosen):

1. Care in close proximity to home
2. Affordable care
3. Care in close proximity to university
4. Licensed daycare
5. Full-time care.

Affordability was especially important for the approximately 25% of students who lived in households earning $25,000 or less yearly. In addition, 29% of the female student parents and 10% of the male student parents were single. Although 68% of the student parents indicated that they would be interested in childcare on campus if it was available, the most important characteristic identified was care in close proximity to home.

Although distribution cannot follow exact ratios when filling empty or new childcare spaces because of other considerations such as the age required (infant, toddler, preschooler) for the spot, this information can guide decision-making. The study's results helped to shape guidelines for distribution of subsidized child care spaces, especially when filling the new 90 space childcare facility that will open in Fall, 2016.

The current project provided much-needed information regarding the profile of student parents at this university. Although the sampling strategy was not perfect, we nevertheless believe that these data provide us with an understanding of child care needs and preferences of our undergraduate and graduate students. Whereas the addition of spots on campus will be critical for this university's students, a broader strategy, incorporating enhanced availability of quality childcare across the city, will also be essential in addressing child care needs of university students.

Scholarly Significance
This study underscores the need to generate evidence to inform practice; the student parent demographic is not well understood as explicit data on this particular group are never systematically gathered. Brown and Nichols (2012) noted that "a full literature search revealed that this population has largely gone unnoticed by the academic community, with the majority of published research focusing on either undergraduate single mothers or graduate students" (Brown & Nichols, 2012, p. 501). Additionally, the nature of this data is that it fluctuates over

time; individual students' needs can change so capturing the data at that granular level provides a snapshot or moment in time, and would not be as helpful in informing policy and principles as an ongoing, more robust strategy. However, developing an in-depth understanding of the group as a whole can be beneficial in determining overall needs, trends, and gaps in service. Brown and Nichols (2012) contended that "to prepare for, attract and retain this population, schools need to become more versed in the policy and programmatic elements which will assist (pregnant and parenting) students in degree completion" (p. 501). They emphasized that more research and data collection regarding this population is required in order to better develop supports and programs for student parents. This study provides one model of data generation that can inform decisions that address student parent needs, especially within the context of the increasing diversity on campus and the recognition that universities need to consider access for students who have historically been underrepresented on our campuses. More Canadian research is required in this field; as Mueller (2008) pointed out, "although the U.S. literature is more advanced in both depth and breadth, the potential to derive Canadian policy implications from this body of work is limited by the substantial institutional differences between PSE systems in the two countries" (p. 35). Only by situating the studies within the context of our Canadian PSE institutions can we hope to gather the evidence to inform Canadian specific policy and to influence practices designed to support access and persistence.

Conclusion

Postsecondary education is increasingly seen as necessary for improving access to highly skilled and more highly paid careers (Finnie et al., 2008). Furthermore, according to Finnie et al. (2008), governments globally, including Canada, are trying to increase participation in higher education. Improving access and persistence rates requires an examination of the complex factors involved in students' choices to enter PSE and to complete their programs. In order to support a growing number of mature students accessing postsecondary education, academic and administrative units on PSE campuses need to consider their specific challenges. Even if the provision of childcare cannot be established on all campuses, understanding the numbers of parents as students, determining their priorities and values regarding childcare, and offering more financial support for student parents are all actions that potentially can improve access and persistence for a subset of postsecondary students.

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