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### Student Parents and Child Care: How finding and funding care for young children affects postsecondary education in Minnesota

Alastriona Kroll

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**CCAMPIS: Child Care Access Means Parents In School**

**Student Parent Support: the challenges and successes of student parents at St. Cloud State**

**University**

by

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## Chapter I: Introduction

Over one quarter of students enrolled at postsecondary institutions are student parents (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2018) with needs unique to the rest of the student body (United States Department of Education, 2022). These students' stressors often include balancing a hectic schedule, multiple roles (parent, student, employee, etc.), and financial concerns (Dill & Henley, 1998). Due to these additional demands on attention and time, student parents are more likely to take longer to earn a degree or to leave school all together prior to graduation (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2018).

Given the high needs of this student group, student parent support offices are found on the campuses of many higher education institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). An example of this resource is the Student Parent Support office at Saint Cloud State University located in central Minnesota, which seeks to help these students while remaining flexible to changing needs (Hermon & Davis, 2004) of the population being served. With funding from the federal Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) grant, student parents who qualify are provided with childcare at the on-campus Lindgren Early Learning Center at Saint Cloud State University. The necessity of providing numerous supports, including child care, to strengthen student parents' determination for educational attainment is the main topic of this paper. Although there are nearly four million undergraduate student parents in the United States (Cruse, et. al., 2019) trying to accomplish educational advancement, too often challenges prevent degrees from being received. With the necessary supports and resources, such as financial aid and child care (Hess, et al., 2014), some of the complexities can be untangled and students can focus on the important things, like family, homework, and progressing toward graduation.

## Background of the Study

A sense of belonging or community among students increases retention (O'Meara, et. al., 2017), but complex, overlapping identities can make finding one's place on campus a challenge (Scharp, et. al., 2021). Being a student parent also positively correlates with other *non-traditional student* characteristics, a fact which denotes compounding equity challenges this demographic faces in their educational experience (Gault, et. al., 2014). The characteristics of non-traditional students include delayed college enrollment (one year or more after high school), part-time attendance, financial independence, veteran status, full-time employment, having dependents, single parent status, or lack of high school diploma (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

Part of Student Parent Support's mission at St Cloud State University is working to facilitate a grant from the United States Department of Education. Child Care Access Means Parents In Schools (or CCAMPIS) is a federal grant which Saint Cloud State University started receiving in the Fall 2018 semester (Mergen, 2018). This grant helps cover the cost of child care which many student parents incur while in school. The grant is open to St. Cloud State University student parents seeking undergraduate or graduate degrees at either the St. Cloud or Plymouth campus locations (St. Cloud State University, 2023). Student parents must meet the financial aid requirements established by Saint Cloud State University as an institution in order to qualify for the grant, as well as have a child enrolled in Lindgren Early Learning Center on-campus at Saint Cloud State University or another National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accredited facility (Mergen, 2018). As part of the CCAMPIS grant agreement at this university, student parents must agree to attend at least one Student Parent Support event on-campus each semester. The United States Department of Education expects

that programs will use CCAMPIS funds to encourage healthy parental involvement in the provided child care as well as for the student to participate in social engagement (United States Department of Education, 2022).

Throughout the paper attention will be paid to national trends in parent enrollment in post-secondary educational programs and the support being offered to them. Money to finance child care programs and grants often come from a collection of different funding streams that are collectively called the Child Care Development Fund (Mach, 2022). The establishment and disbursement of funding through CCAMPIS grants will be of particular importance within this research. Particular attention will be given to the work being done in Minnesota, specifically at the office of Student Parent Support at Saint Cloud State University to implement programming and boost graduation numbers among this often-overlooked cohort.

### **Importance of the Study**

Student parents are part of a large category of postsecondary students called *non-traditional students*, which despite outnumbering traditional students three to one at community colleges (McFarland, et al., 2019), goes largely unrecognized and unstudied by researchers (Chen & Hossler, 2017). Students with this classification often face social limitations, economic barriers, and cultural discords, which are linked to a delayed enrollment or a lack of retention. Coupled with additional equity challenges, these students are at a high risk of leaving school without a degree (Pusser, et al., 2007). Of first-time, full-time non-traditional students enrolled in two-year programs, only 52 percent of students returned after the first year (Margarit & Kennedy, 2019). The funding of non-traditional postsecondary education by the United States government and other entities is seen as an investment which will result in a more educated,

employable workforce, but with low retention numbers and even lower graduation rates, concern is being raised about what can be done to keep students in school (O'Keefe, 2013).

Over half of student parents (52%) left school after six years without earning a degree compared to 32 percent of students without children (United States Government Accountability Office, 2019). Finances should be considered as a major contributing factor to this statistic. College students who experience financial distress are at an increased risk of failing to finish their degrees (Britt, et al., 2017). Postsecondary education is a path for many to gain secure jobs with salary able to provide more advantages to a graduate's family (Gault, et al., 2018). This is only possible if the student can continue taking courses and completing requirements, which is not an option if a student can no longer afford educational expenses (Long, 2009) or child care costs.

Tallying the costs of raising a family, with educational expenses, it is not surprising that money is a primary concern for many student parents (Navarro-Cruz, et al., 2022). In fact, lack of finances was the top reason (48%) listed by students for not re-enrolling in courses in fall 2021 after taking courses previous semesters (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022a).

More students are seeking employment now after the Covid-19 pandemic (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2021) with the scheduling flexibility online classes provides. However, additional employment opportunities are less feasible for some, when the average student parent spends 90 minutes/day providing care (Crispin & Nikolaou, 2019). Student parent households are in a unique position where they are more likely than non-student peers to be low income, many due to the financial burden of education in order to secure a promotion or seek a better paying job (Dotterer, et al., 2021).



Mothers, especially single mothers (Gault, et al., 2018), borrow more than other student parents or students without children. Female students enrolled in 2015-2016 held a median \$3,500 debt, compared to student mothers at \$8,300 in debt, and single mothers who were students carried \$9,500 in debt (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2018). As of 2021, women in the United States earn 17 percent less than men in full-time, year-round employment (United States Census Bureau, 2021), which translates into women needing to work 40 more days each year to make the same amount as men with the same job. The disparity between male and female headed single family households amounts to men making an average of approximately \$19,000 more annually (United States Census Bureau, 2021). Many student parents are trying to use education to break the cycle of poverty, but postsecondary education is not free, and neither is most child care (Amenumey, et al., 2020).

In addition to the financial benefits, parents also enroll to complete their degrees to set a positive example for their children and to provide them with a better future (Hess, et al., 2014). Having at least some college education was positively correlated with more involvement and improved educational outcomes in their children's schooling (Attewell & Lavin, 2007). Parental postsecondary education leads to many positives including higher income for families (Britt, et al., 2017), greater access to healthcare, positive parenting practices, improved mental health, academic success by the next generation (Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013), and increased parental involvement in their children's education (Oswald, et al., 2017).

Non-traditional students, including student parents, have additional external influences which impact educational pursuit and attainment (Chen & Hossler, 2017). Using Crenshaw's work on intersectionality, it is important to realize that student parents are not simply the sum of two combined identities, but an overlapping of identities along with other factors which makes

each individual unique (Crenshaw, 2011). Furthermore, each student parent should be offered additional support in traversing their individual path to promote persistence until the degree is completed (Spitzig & Renner, 2022).

### **Research Questions:**

1. What are the needs and challenges of student parents in higher education?
2. What are the benefits of the CCAMPIS grant and Student Parent Support services?
3. What are the challenges/obstacles to implementing CCAMPIS programming on university campuses?

### **Literature Search Description**

For my research, I used the Saint Cloud State University Miller Library website to conduct searches. This paper used information gathered from previous State Cloud State University Student Parent Support programming, CCAMPIS data, United States Census statistics, data from the United States Department of Education, and literature review on the topic of student parents. I also collected literature looking at how other institutions implement support services for student parents. Some of the keywords used during the research process were student parents, post-secondary, child care, higher education, federal funding, and CCAMPIS.

### **Definition of Terms:**

CCAMPIS - The Child Care Access Means Parents In Schools Program supports the participation of low-income parents in postsecondary education by providing students with grants for campus-based child care services (United States Department of Education, 2022).

Family Child Care – licensed home-based child care usually taking place in the provider’s home (Allvin, 2021)

Informal Child Care – non-licensed child care provided by family, friends, or a nanny/babysitter  
(Allvin, 2021)

Minnesota Student Parent Support Initiative (MSPSI) - a program established to address the  
academic and health needs of expectant and parenting post-secondary students within the  
state (Amenumey, et al., 2020)

Non-Traditional Student – a student of whom one or more of the following is true: delayed  
college enrollment by a year or more after high school, part-time attendance, financial  
independence, full-time employment (over 30 hours), having dependents other than a  
spouse, single parent status, and lack of high school diploma (National Center for  
Education Statistics, 2015)

Persistence - continued enrollment (or degree completion) at any higher education institution —  
including one different from the institution of initial enrollment (National Student  
Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019)

Retention - continued enrollment (or degree completion) within the same higher education  
institution (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019)

Student Parent Support (SPS) – An office at St. Cloud State University with the role of assisting  
student parents and advocating for equity on their behalf (Saint Cloud State University,  
2020)

## **Chapter II: Literature Review**

This study intends to demonstrate the need for programming specific to the student parent demographic as well as the necessity for holistic support to increase the persistence rate of this population. Due to the close connection between academic success among student parents and affordable child care, the finding, securing, and financing of child care for student parent families will be a main topic of discussion. The programming and CCAMPIS grant initiated by Student Parent Support at Saint Cloud State University will be highlighted to demonstrate efforts on an institutional level to meet the high demands that student parents have on their shoulders. While the struggles of student parenthood are often complex and compounding, the benefit which the CCAMPIS grant and effective supports provide student families can ease some of the burden and make graduation a more attainable summit.

### **Parents as Students**

It is not an easy task to be a college student and a parent. These two roles or identities require distinct skill sets and both require a great deal of time and energy (Scharp, et al., 2021). One is an endless job with no holidays, time off, or sick leave. Despite the challenge of performing these roles simultaneously, there are numerous benefits to the individual and the family after graduation, including expanded possibilities for employment, better living conditions, higher wages, greater access to resources, and increased prospects of their own children pursuing postsecondary degrees (Noll, et al., 2017). Earning a postsecondary degree can be a major step out of poverty (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2018) and into a stable, more optimistic future for families, but before that, there must be studying, homework, and someone to provide childcare (Navarro-Cruz, et al., 2022).

A major struggle for student parents is time. Balancing coursework, employment, child care, and family life is a massive undertaking for any individual. Despite this, on average, student parents have demonstrated that they have comparable, if not higher, grade point averages or GPAs than college classmates without children (Hess, et al., 2014). Remarkably, this academic triumph does not correspond with earning degrees as 52 percent of student parents dropout within six years of enrolling in school as compared to 32 percent of non-parents (Wladis, et al., 2018).

According to self-reporting, student parents spend less time than non-parent students both in class and doing homework (Crispin & Nikolaou, 2019). Parenthood decreases a student's likelihood to remain enrolled subsequent semesters (Wladis, et al., 2018). Having children also affects both the number of credits attempted or course load of the student and the number of credits completed or earned in the semester (Wladis, et al., 2018). Parents of very young children (infants, toddlers, and preschoolers) have revealed lower academic motivation and goal attainment than student parents of older children, because these younger ages require more attention and direct care needs (Lovell, 2014). Over half (53%) of all student parents have one or more children under the age of five (Gault, et. al., 2019). Likely due to this lack of momentum, student parents of preschool age children have higher drop-out rates than parents of other age groups (Wladis, et al., 2018).

Online or distance learning courses became the way for students to learn during the Covid-19 pandemic. This continued into fall 2020 when 11.8 million undergraduate students (or 75%) had at least one course online and 44 percent had no in-person courses (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022b). With the growing popularity of online or hybrid courses, more student parents may take a lighter load of courses from home so that the parent can provide child

care while attempting to earn a degree ((National Center for Education Statistics, 2022c). While this may serve a family well in some regards, reducing the number of credits taken at once causes the parent's total length of time enrolled as a student to increase and makes graduation a more unrealistic, distant goal. The slow academic momentum of many student parents is a contributing factor to the high dropout rate (Wladis, et al., 2018).

### **Trends in Enrollment**

The number of student parents enrolled in colleges in the United States was once on the upward trend, but the recession in 2008 and high costs of childcare, gas, and other necessities mean that the surge of parents returning to the classroom to complete their degrees is not constant (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2018). Student parent enrollment is market-dependent, rising and falling with national fiscal trends (Kruvelis, et al., 2017). According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research, there were nearly four million student parents pursuing degrees in 2019, which accounts for approximately 22 percent of all college undergraduates (Cruse, et al., 2019). Of that four million student parents, around 2.7 million (or 70%) were women and more than 60 percent of those women are single parents (Cruse, et al., 2019).

Nationally in 2018, 31.6 percent of students enrolled at two-year colleges were over the age of 25 years old (United States Census Bureau, 2019). While that number is not comprised entirely of student parents, it does underline the fact that many non-traditional students attend community college initially before transferring to another institution or get an associate's or two-year degree from one of these schools (McFarland, et al., 2019). Community colleges serve an important role in higher education by providing learning opportunities for individuals, especially non-traditional students (Spitzig & Renner, 2022). Although community college tuition and fees are low in comparison to four-year institutions, the cost of tuition and fees are only a portion of

the overall cost of attendance (Duke-Benfield, 2015) which includes housing, food, and child care costs. Financial aid may cover some or all of the expenses from the postsecondary institution, but that does not typically bring down any of the additional costs that still will apply to the household when a parent enrolls (Kuh, et al., 2007).

### **Non-Traditional Students**

Student parents are one part of a larger collection of students with the label of *non-traditional*, which has grown since the 1970s to make-up 70 percent of all undergraduate students in the country (Chen & Hossler, 2017). There is no singular list of attributes to qualify an individual for this category, but most entities use age, school enrollment patterns, financial and family status, and high school education status (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). The characteristics of non-traditional students can include more specifically, delayed college enrollment (one year or more after high school), part-time attendance, financial independence from parents or guardians, veteran or active military status, full-time employment, having dependents, single parent status, or lack of high school diploma (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

Student parents are a diverse group. Nationally, they are more likely to be students of color (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2018), to be first generation college students, need financial assistance, attend school part-time, enroll at a community college, and need remedial coursework than traditionally-aged college students (Gault, et al., 2014). Many student parents are older than their classmates, with three in five student parents being age 30 or older (United States Department of Education, 2018) and 27 years old is the median age (Cruse, et al., 2019). The interplay and conflicts between various aspects of a non-traditional student's life can be the source of additional stress (Hermon & Davis, 2004).

## **Student Parent Mental Health**

Stress for one reason or another affects every college student. Whether it is financial stress, relationships, academics, etc., being a student is stressful. There are many ways, both unhealthy and healthy, to manage stressors (Hermon & Davis, 2004). An outcome of individual stress is the effect it has on relationships (Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2019). Although student parents experience stress from multiple sources, the families of these students confront tension as well (Gerrard & Roberts, 2006).

### **Contagion of Stress**

According to Dotterer et al. (2021), stress is like a contagion or virus that spreads from one location to another by a person who serves as a carrier. The theory posits that the combination of work/school and family roles generates excessive stress, forming a contagion of stress which dominates both domains of life (Dotterer, et al., 2021). The authors also state that the result of stress may overwhelm one domain of a person's life so that it seeps into another, which they refer to as *spillover*.

### **Effect of Stress on Parent and Student**

Academic concerns and unrealistic course expectations were found to be significantly correlated with school spillover, which is academic stress spilling into other non-education areas, mainly family/home life (Pedersen & Jodin, 2016). Emotional distress and financial strain can be predictors of parenting quality (Herbers, et al., 2017). Spillover from school to home or from home to school can affect familial relationships, which then can cause more stress, forming a cycle of stress.

Stress is handled differently by each individual, but broad trends have been seen in research and these trends seem to follow gender lines (Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2019). Women



were likely to report a family issue that is causing them stress and they are significantly more likely to report school concerns spilling into family life compared to men (Pedersen & Jodin, 2016). When a student experiences courses with heavy workloads, professors with unrealistic expectations, and academic challenges, it is unlikely stress over these student stressors will remain reserved for hours when the individual is on-campus or doing homework (Dotterer, et al., 2021). Faced with an arduous course load, a student parent may need to adapt by increasing their amount of time spent studying to muster satisfactory grades. For a traditional college undergraduate student, revising a semester's schedule to include this additional time is not as stressful or complicated as it is for a student parent (Dill & Henley, 1998). A schedule change for a student parent with a young child often means that child care must be reexamined (Navarro-Cruz, et al., 2022). For some families, a significant other may need to alter their schedule to provide this care, which might mean changing work hours or the family may need to utilize a child care center for services, which can be an unexpected expense that is outside of a family's means (Dayne, et al., 2021). If a family is fortunate, they may have a close friend or relative who can provide informal child care (Navarro-Cruz, et al., 2022).

An interesting study on student parents, their stress, and dual roles of parent and student was conducted by researchers at Utah State University. This study's goal was to gain a better understanding of the stressors for these students and how they related to family relationships, to provide better resources, retain, and graduate more student parents (Dotterer, et al., 2021). Parental postsecondary education leads to many positives including higher income for families, greater access to healthcare, positive parenting practices, positive mental health, and academic success by the next generation (Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013). It is also extremely challenging to be both a student and a parent. The pressure of juggling these roles can lead to

strain on family relationships, including between partners and between a parent and children (Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2019)

### **Time Stress for Student Parents**

Despite having a child enrolled in care, many student parents feel rushed to complete school work during hours of child care, with 61 percent saying that the child care available did not provide enough time to complete work (Wladis, et al., 2018). Student parents spend less time sleeping and studying than non-parent students, meanwhile spending more time employed for pay and caring for children (Crispin & Nikolaou, 2019). The potential flaw in that type of schedule is that sleep, physical health, and stress are all interconnected, so as students get less sleep, physical health will also decrease while stress is likely to rise (Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2019). Having higher stress and depleted somatic persistence creates a challenging setting for both student and parent identities to be successful. One of the great challenges as a student parent, especially one with a young child, is that there is a cultural expectation or standard of *good parenting* which takes precedence and must be fully met regardless of other responsibilities (Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2019) including employment and education. Although this norm may imply otherwise, student parents need child care to allocate time for being a student to complete educational goals (United States Government Accountability Office, 2019). Multi-tasking reduces time quality by dividing a person's attention between two tasks such as providing care while doing coursework (Wladis, et al., 2018). Lower time quality does not impart the same educational benefit as when attention is focused solely on the curriculum, but unfortunately many students perform under these conditions due to limited time available between employment, parenting, and other responsibilities (Hess, et al., 2014).

One difficulty in finding financial aid or child care subsidies is that in some cases there are stipulations which require the individual to be enrolled in a specific number of courses to be designated as a *full-time student*, work a minimum number of hours each week, or graduate in a certain length of time after initial enrollment (Wladis, et al., 2018). One or more of these three requirements can be major obstacles for already overworked student parents. Parenting takes time from hours completing assignments, attending class, or earning additional income through employment. Student parents are less likely compared to non-parent students to engage in school related activities including class time, homework, and extra-curriculars (Crispin & Nikolaou, 2019) and when participation does occur, it is for a shorter time.

Merit-based scholarships can have predetermined standards for student performance, but student parents are not able to follow the same academic pattern as non-parent students (Chen & Hossler, 2017). Due to additional time demands, student parents may be setting themselves up for academic failure if their course schedule is too rigorous or employment with academics becomes overwhelming (Kuh, et al., 2007). Students who receive low or insufficient grades may have to retake courses to earn the necessary credit, which means additional money and time spent (Wladis, Hachey, & Conway, 2018).

Student parents, especially parents of young children, may experience heightened emotional stress due to the amount of time that school and employment occupy in a day or week. It is not uncommon for individuals to question whether the additional hours away from home will be justified by the end goal of a degree (Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2019). The psychological and emotional pressure of having a parent in school is a worry that some parents have for their children (Gerrard & Roberts, 2006).

### **Separation Anxiety and Guilt**

It is not easy to have a parenting partner who has additional time and attention requirements away from children and less recreational time as a family. The added time away and stress can be noticed in spousal and parent-child relationships (Navarro-Cruz, et al., 2022). It can be hard on a child to have fewer hours with a parent, especially if this parent served as primary caregiver in the past (Gerrard & Roberts, 2006). Mothers who return to school after their maternity leave or when their child has a greater capacity for independence, may experience conflicting emotions about prioritizing their education over being a stay-at-home mom (Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2019). Children often experience separation anxiety when transitioning from one or more parents as caregivers to another individual or a child care center setting (Wilson & Lyons, 2013). This type of anxiety is common in young children and is not typically considered to be a sign for future long-term anxiety disorders or other mental health issues unless it continues long after the schedule has been regularized or if the display of emotions due to separation is distinctly inappropriate for the age of the individual (Fogel, 2014). For example, it might be a cause for concern if an eight-year-old child sobs and sucks his thumb every morning when dropped off at the school which he has attended since kindergarten. Of course, one or more traumatic events and Adverse Childhood Experiences or ACEs play a role in human behavior and interpersonal communication, so it is necessary to assess what a child or family may be working through before declaring a response to be *inappropriate*. Early trauma can play a role in how an individual responds to their environment and research has shown us that identifying trauma and trauma responses early will help survivors to better heal from their experiences (Campbell & Palm, 2015). Separation anxiety takes an emotional toll on both the child and the parent. Leaving a child with another caregiver when they are in distress takes a steely resolve. Guilt can plague a parent who hears the wailing, “*Don’t go!*” of their child or the cries of their

infant. With assurance that they will be reunited, the student parent must leave to attend to the student side of life.

### **Student Parent Families**

When a parent enrolls in postsecondary education, it begins a new chapter not just for that individual, but for the entire family (Hess, et al., 2014). This can be a transformative process for the parent to work through to gain a better future for themselves and their family (Attewell & Lavin, 2007). The burdens that come with education lie predominantly on the student, who must balance multiple identities while enrolled (Scharp, et al., 2021). It is important to remember, however, that student parents are not isolated in the journey for higher education. Family members are unique in playing both key roles in providing motivation for education persistence and, occasionally, acting as an antagonist to achieving or completing goals (Gerrard & Roberts, 2006)

### **Children of Student Parents**

The age of children of student parents range from pre-natal to adulthood. Some parents begin or return to school when their own children begin the college process, while others have not decided to undertake the journey until they themselves are grandparents. The majority student parents (56 percent) have a child under five years old (United States Government Accountability Office, 2019). It is difficult to get absolute numbers for comparison because student parents with older children do not typically include them on paperwork for enrollment or financial aid purposes, especially if the child or children are no longer living in the household. Additionally, there are cases where students who are step, adoptive, or foster parents do not identify themselves as student parents because they are not biological parents (Gault, et al., 2014).

Enhancing the educational success for student parents in higher education is a benefit to not only those students, but subsequent generations as well (Attewell & Lavin, 2007). Children of parents who earn a postsecondary degree are more likely themselves to pursue a degree (Noll, et al., 2017). Additionally, the higher socioeconomic status provided by their parent's education can ensure that a child has better living conditions, greater access to resources, and increased opportunity to their own educational goals (Gault, et al., 2018).

### **Familial Relationships**

One of the factors to influence family relationships in student parent families was something called *personal vulnerability* (Dotterer, et al., 2021). This can include feeling crushed by responsibilities or individually trapped in a situation or life choice. When the authors examined the relationship between personal vulnerability and other variables, it was found that higher personal vulnerability predicted more distress in child-parent relationships. Interestingly, another emotional factor in the study which researchers called *event load* was not a predictor of distress in parent-child relationships (Dotterer, et al., 2021). This type of emotion is characterized by feeling *swamped* or *overextended*, which logically seems to fit with a scenario where an overtaxed parent may have a non-constructive interaction or negative relationship with their child. An important conclusion of this research is the understanding that it is not the multiple roles of student parents which inherently trigger heightened stress, but instead that the perception of the student's ability to deal with stressors (Dotterer, et al., 2021) can cause event load and personal vulnerability to be exposed. By setting these students up with resources to lower stress levels, better relationships within the family can be fostered (Pedersen & Jodin, 2016).

A factor which influences familial relations is co-parenting distress, the problematic interaction between the parents involved. The term *co-parenting* can indicate two parents who are no longer in a romantic or physical relationship, but work together to raise a child, such as cases of divorce or separation. Co-parenting can also refer to a couple in a relationship who work together to parent, share responsibilities, and function as a united front to tackle child-rearing dilemmas. In studying married couples where one or both individuals were student parents, researchers found that there was a positive association between personal vulnerability, co-parenting distress, and distress in parent-child relationships (Dotterer, Juhasz, Murphy, Park, & Boyce, 2021). This means parents who scored high in one of these areas likely scored high in the other two. Furthermore, the association between these scores was greater for fathers than mothers.

### **Gender Roles**

Through interviews, fathers indicated more financial stress and pressure to sustain the family as a provider (Dotterer, et al., 2021). Male student parents, perhaps more than female, feel as though they are juggling three large plates: family, education, and finances (Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2019). The cultural expectation for men to serve as the *breadwinner* of the household can be the source of additional stress (Jones, et al., 2016).

Men reported more distress, in comparison to women, in the relationship with their children when combined with high levels of personal vulnerability (Dotterer, et al., 2021). Previous studies have shown that even though mothers had a disproportionate share of housework and childcare compared to fathers, it is the men who reported greater spillover stress from home to work (Bolger, et al., 1989). Women make up a distinct majority of student parents

at 70 percent (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2018), but single mothers are the least likely to complete their degree.

### **Single Parent Families**

The splitting of child care responsibilities between adults is not possible in single family households. In this instance, childcare from someone outside the household is essential. A student parent cannot attend classes when child care is not available. Single student parents have a different burden than those with a partner, managing all the things for the household while supporting the family and being a student (Cruse, et al., 2018). Childcare is crucial back-up even if the student has a school-age child who has a scheduled day off or becomes ill and cannot attend school (Gault, et al., 2018).

With approximately 21 million single parents in the United States (Alon, et al., 2020), student parent support programs must recognize the needs of this group when considering how to serve families. Single mothers who are students often face significant challenges to completing their degree (Cruse, et al., 2018). Just eight percent of single mothers graduate with an associate or bachelor's degree in six years or fewer, compared to 49 percent of female students who are not mothers (Gault, et al., 2018). According to census data, the number of women serving as head of the household without a partner has been rising since 1970 (United States Census Bureau, 1991) along with more single women becoming homeowners (United States Census Bureau, 2021). Despite the growing percentage of single women becoming financially independent and serving as the head household (Shrider, et al., 2021), single mothers are more likely than single men to be financially insecure and less likely to fund educational advancement independently with 89 percent of single mothers in school qualifying as low income and 63 percent living at or below the poverty line (Kruvelis, et al., 2017).



## **Finding Child Care**

There is a shortage of child care in the United States, especially after the unprecedented interruption of services caused by Covid 19 (Landivar, et al., 2022). While rebuilding and restructuring are underway in many areas of life, the need for quality, affordable child care is omnipresent. Early signs of this crisis were being felt in 2016, when a national survey (McFarland, et al., 2018) found that 32 percent of parents who experienced difficulty finding care listed cost as the primary reason with a lack of open spaces as the second most popular reason (27%). The younger the child, the harder to find an opening (McFarland, et al., 2018). Student parents require time to attend courses, study, and complete assignments when they are not simultaneously providing direct care for their children. Procuring someone else to provide care during the necessary hours can be itself a daunting task and a deterrent for the parent to enroll or stay enrolled in postsecondary education (Noll, et al., 2017).

### **High Demand for Child Care Among Students**

In a 2021 study, researchers examined the struggles Hispanic student parents were facing at California State University Long Beach, a four-year Hispanic Serving Institution with a student enrollment over 35,000 students (The California State University, 2018). For this study, 786 student parents from the school responded to an online survey sent by email. Fifty-four percent of the them identified as Hispanic, which is slightly higher than the university-wide statistic of 40 percent (Dayne, et al., 2021). This is not an unexpected finding as student parents across the country are more likely to be students of color than their childless classmates (Cruse, et al., 2019).

In addition to demographic questions, Dayne, Youngok, and Roy asked an open-ended question: “As a student with (a) child/children, what could [the institution] do to better serve you

and your childcare needs?” Four major themes emerged from the responses: lack of information about childcare, affordability, access, and support services. There are 168 full-time equivalent spots at the on-campus childcare center for students at California State University Long Beach. This shortage of spots was an issue noted by parents on their surveys, who complained about the difficulty to acquire care for their child. Further illustrating the inadequacy of fewer than 170 spots for all the children, only 7.3 percent of the student parents who took the survey responded that they utilized the on-campus childcare (Dayne, et al., 2021).

### **Informal Child Care**

In the study at California State University Long Beach, the vast majority (67%) responded that family provided childcare (Dayne, et al., 2021). Utilizing a social support network to provide care is called *informal child care*. This type of child care can be extremely beneficial to less educated parents or those with several young children (Landivar, et al., 2022). Some student parents may enlist help from family as a money-saving strategy (Navarro-Cruz, et al., 2022), even though it may not be the first choice for care. Students and young parents in particular may take advantage of a relative or friend who can provide care when the parent needs to be in class or study (Dayne, et al., 2021), but it should be recognized that this can add an unanticipated stress for the parent. Enlisting a friend to supply child care can change the dynamics of a relationship and the parent may feel guilt or apprehension about the family’s needs (Kruvelis, et al., 2017) especially if conflicts emerge.

Informal child care is not an option for some families, for example those with limited support networks (Landivar, et al., 2022). Newly arrived families from other states or countries do not have the same opportunities for informal care as families with roots in the area. Those without such supports may not have the option to utilize this social capital and, therefore, be

unable to enroll in college (Navarro-Cruz, et al., 2022). A 2014 Institute for Women's Policy Research survey of female community college students found that 77 percent of respondents with children received free child care from the child's grandparents or other relatives (Hess, et al., 2014). In the same study, nearly half (47%) of respondents with children age 10 years old and under confirmed by survey that the kind of quality care that they wish for their children was too expensive for their families (Hess, et al., 2014). Desired, but financially unattainable, child care is not unique to that study as parents across the country struggle with the same issue of acquiring excellent care at an affordable cost (Landivar, et al., 2022).

### **On-Campus Child Care Centers**

Perhaps the pinnacle of child care options for student parents, on-campus child care boasts many positives, but these do not come without negatives (Scharp, et al., 2021). In addition to spots being illusive to secure, parents at California State University Long Beach expressed that it was not easy to find material about childcare on-campus with barely a quarter (24.7%) feeling that the university provides adequate information about the center to students (Dayne, et al., 2021).

In 2016, the average waiting list for an on-campus child care center was 80 children (Cruse, et al., 2018). Student parents may feel as though campus-based child care is a concealed operation (Dayne, et al., 2021) requiring parents to have an *in* to be privileged enough to get on a waiting list. Unfortunately, many institutions are not broadcasting information about the grant money available for care. Two-thirds of CCAMPIS recipient institutions were observed to have understated information about this funding opportunity on their online presence (United States Government Accountability Office, 2019). This is problematic because low-income parents may be dissuaded from pursuing on-campus care if the family judges an inability to pay for the care

without the financial assistance. Student parents do not need additional barriers placed in the path of degree completion (Lovell, 2014). Despite the difficulty finding and acquiring this type of care, there is an impressive assertion which on-campus child care is positively correlated to parental retention and graduation. Student parents who sent a child to an on-campus child care center were three times more likely (27.9%) to graduate on-time compared to student parents who used other child care options (7.9%) (Hess, et al., 2014). While that data came from a single institution over the course of eight years, the results follow what has been seen across the country on campuses with child care centers: on-campus child care leads to better educational attainment for the parents of children enrolled (Cruse, et al., 2018). As a student parent, getting a child accepted into on-campus childcare can be financially advantageous. However, typically student parents must meet minimum enrollment criteria to receive child care services (United States Department of Education, 2023). There are additional financial and administrative burdens experienced by student parents that require time and additional effort to have a child enrolled in care (United States Government Accountability Office, 2019).

### **Financial Aid and Child Care**

Paying for childcare is a hurdle for student parents, who are already paying the bills of both a college student and a parent. There are financial aid options available for many students, but childcare is often an additional, and very sizable, cost that is not included in a typical financial aid package (Britt, et al., 2017). In the federal financial aid process, the cost of attendance is calculated to give students a clearer picture of what the expected expense will be (United States Department of Education, 2023). Individual institutions determine cost of attendance or family contribution, but most do not factor in the presence of dependent children in the computation (Wladis, et al., 2018). Given the economic burden that child care places on

some student families, the financial aid awards provided may not be sufficient in covering expenses and the family is left with unmet bills to be paid (Duke-Benfield, 2015). Grant money received by student parents who qualify does not have to be repaid to the government. For this reason, the CCAMPIS grant is significantly more advantageous for families than a loan, especially for those on or below the poverty line (Gault, et al., 2019). The students who do not qualify for financial aid or are unable to meet requirements for specific grants, may enroll their children at off-campus childcare centers or find informal care to minimize the out-of-pocket bill (Kruvelis, et al., 2017). It is also common that student families will cobble together child care using a combination of options to cover the times when care is needed and at a price the family can afford (Dayne, et al., 2021). The cost of on-campus childcare often increases with extended hours, which is what some parents need to cover work, night classes, and homework time (Kruvelis, et al., 2017). That additional expense can be simply too cost-prohibitive for some families, especially single-parent households. Families who could benefit from on-campus care must seek other options to meet their scheduling needs or endeavor to make a higher income to cover the cost of care.

### **Child Care and Employment**

The cost of childcare is a chief concern for many families, especially when one or both parents are in school. It is not uncommon even among non-student families that an adult takes a job simply to cover childcare costs (Baum, 2002). Between 2001 and 2016, there was an average 72 percent increase in out-of-pocket care expenses for families with children in center-based care and 48 percent increase in non-familial, non-center care (McFarland, et al., 2018). Two adult households may arrange work and school schedules to avoid this expense by switching shifts with children. This is not an ideal arrangement, but it can sometimes function logistically,

particularly if it is for a short-term basis and/or when there is an attainable goal in the near future, like a parent graduating or a child becoming old enough to go to kindergarten. The correlation between having low income and being a student parent is high (Noll, et al., 2017), which means that getting employment with an adequate salary to cover household expenses is critical for these families. Women in lower socio-economic classes are more likely to determine work schedules based on child care costs and wages earned than women of higher socio-economic class (Baum, 2002).

Because most care comes with such a high price, some parents, particularly mothers, will only seek employment if the wage is enough to justify the cost (Alon, et al., 2020). Furthermore, women are unlikely to return to work after giving birth or maternity leave if the potential wage earned is less or equal to the cost for infant child care during the hours worked (Baum, 2002). Mothers with less than a college degree are likely in lower paying jobs which makes paying for child care, especially care for multiple young children, less feasible on a limited budget (Landivar, et al., 2022). The Covid 19 pandemic brought disproportionate job loss to women with children (Alon, et al., 2020) with this subset of the workforce more likely to work in jobs hit hard by stay-at-home orders. In the closing of schools and child care centers to prevent spread of disease, many women who held jobs outside of the home transitioned into a role of stay-at-home mom or began working from home to provide care for children (United States Census Bureau, 2021).

### **Child Care and Programming in Minnesota**

In Minnesota, great value is placed on education. Public school students consistently rank among the highest in the nation for math and science (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022b). Of state residents over the age of 25, 94.3 percent had a high school diploma or higher,

making it the fifth most educated state (United States Census Bureau, 2021). Minnesota is often touted as a “great place to raise a family”, but with the ever-widening gap in child care, that claim to fame may soon be withdrawn. High demand and low retention of staff have driven costs of child care up (United States Department of Education, 2022). Minnesota is the sixth least affordable state for center-based infant care (ChildCare Aware MN, 2018). On average, it would cost a married couple making median income 20 percent of their household budget to send an infant to center-based care and family-based care would cost about 11 percent (ChildCare Aware MN, 2018). Annual infant childcare center rates in some counties of the state were approximately \$17,000 (ChildCare Aware MN, 2018). This is more than the annual average cost of tuition and fees for a student enrolled at any one of Minnesota’s State colleges or universities, averaging \$6,109 or \$9,894, respectively (Minnesota State, 2023). Childcare costs added to tuition costs would be a serious blow to a family’s finances, especially one of low-income (Mergen, 2018). This makes paying for child care seem unreasonable unless the income earned during those care-provided hours is decidedly more than the rate of care. With that in mind, it is not surprising that many women chose to remain at home with their young children during and after the Covid-19 pandemic (Alon, et al., 2020). In central Minnesota, unemployment rates for women fell 4.4 percent from 2019-2021, while the rates for men fell only 1.7 percent (United States Census Bureau, 2021). In a national survey collected in 2020, 24 percent of all female students and 14 percent of all male students “found it difficult finding safe or reliable child care as a result of Covid-19” (United States Department of Education, 2021). Of all postsecondary students who left school after spring 2021 without earning a degree, 12 percent said that it was due to an interruption in care arrangements (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

Nearly half of student parents reported paying for childcare, with monthly costs averaging about \$490 (United States Government Accountability Office, 2019). Research shows families from a low socio-economic class are the most likely to enroll their children in low-quality child care which contributes to the achievement gap in low-income children, particularly children of color (Duncan & Magnuson, 2015). Furthermore, in deciding where to enroll children in care, location and cost were the leading barriers for low-income families (McFarland, et al., 2018). There are multiple programs in place for families with financial need to apply for assistance to help pay the rising costs of care (United States Government Accountability Office, 2019).

### **Child Care Assistance**

In Minnesota, Child Care Assistance will provide families with discounted costs as incentive if a child is enrolled in care with a three- or four-star rating through Parent Aware (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2020) or another recognized accreditation or certification. Through this program, the government pays for a portion of the child care through reimbursement to the provider, and the family pays what amount, if any, remains to the provider (Mach, 2022). Every three years, a review of statewide child care costs occurs which helps guide legislators in determining the amount of reimbursement given to providers for taking on low-income families (Mach, 2022). The Federal Administration for Families and Children requires that states provide reimbursement equal to at least the 25th percentile and recommends coverage to the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile based on the most recent survey results (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2020). But in Minnesota, changes to the reimbursement rates were not made between 2014 and 2020 to reflect the rising child care costs around the state (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2020). Adjustments were made to the rate and a bill currently awaiting



approval in the Minnesota Senate would provide priority to student parents on waiting lists to receive Child Care Assistance Program funds and it would permanently establish reimbursements at the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile level (Minnesota HF 13, 2023).

During the 2021 fiscal year, an average of 11,359 families in the state received child care assistance with average monthly payments about \$1,576 per family (Mach, 2022). Money to finance child care programs and grants often come from a collection of different funding streams that are collectively called the Child Care Development Fund (Mach, 2022). The new, expanded Child Care Assistance Program would be funded partially through this fund and with remaining federal Covid-19 child care relief funding (Minnesota HF 13, 2023). If there is still an amount owed after the Child Care Assistance Program reimbursement rate is subtracted from the child care provider rate, the family is responsible for paying the remainder of the bill. For this reason, if the CCAP rate is too low in comparison to the rates of providers, then families are contributing more to child care than the original intention for the program (ChildCare Aware MN, 2018), especially considering that those who qualify for the Child Care Assistance Program are low-income households.

Enrolling a child in family child care is becoming more challenging in greater Minnesota with half of the providers open in 2022 than had been open in 2000 (Werner, 2022). Family child care makes up the bulk of child care options in many rural areas of the state, but the number of providers has been decreasing nation-wide (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2020). The shortage in workers caused by low wages is a main reason why child care programs are struggling (United States Department of Education, 2022). Wages are not competitive enough to retain staff, so spots for children must be dropped to fit within legal staff-to-child ratios (NAEYC, 2021). Spaces designed for more children are not being fully utilized. To raise the pay

for employees, the tuition rate for families is typically increased. The discussion of raising rates can be difficult for care providers as the families with the greatest need for quality child care, often cannot afford the market rate (Lindgren Child Care Center & Minnesota Student Parent Support Initiative, 2019).

On January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2023, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz announced his budget for the coming year. In this plan, he recommended the creation of a grant program for student parents and additional funding to support entities and institutions that assist pregnant students or parents of young children (Child Aware MN, 2023). The amounts proposed were \$6,924,000 in fiscal year 2024, \$6,439,000 in fiscal year 2025, and \$5,939,000 in each of the following years. Funding for this grant would come from the general fund and would be administered in cooperation with the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) and the Office of Higher Education (OHE) (Child Aware MN, 2023).

### **Minnesota Student Parent Support Initiative**

In 2010, a program called Minnesota Student Parent Support Initiative (MSPSI) was established to address the academic and health needs of expectant and parenting postsecondary students within the state. The program offered enrolled families a coordinated management of services, like the service a social or case worker would provide, as well as referrals to health, educational, and social services for both the students and their children through Student Parent Centers at nine institutes of higher education across Minnesota (Amenumey, Gardner, Linde, & Margolis, 2020). MSPSI was funded through the Pregnancy Assistance Fund authorized through the 2010 Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ChildCare Aware MN, 2018). The same year, the Minnesota Department of Health received funding through the Office of Population

Affairs (OPA) to improve the health, education, social, and economic outcomes of student parents and their families (Amenumey, et al., 2020).

One of the driving impetuses for MSPSI was the increase in student parents identified among those enrolled at Minnesota colleges and universities (Minnesota Department of Health, 2020). The Minnesota Department of Higher Education reported that for the 2014-2015 school year, 31,392 undergraduate students enrolled in Minnesota were student parents (Djurovich, et al., 2016). Furthermore, the stakeholders knew that higher academic achievement tends to yield positive, lasting effects for parents and children such as higher wages, better living conditions, greater access to resources, and greater likelihood of the children pursuing higher education themselves (Noll, et al., 2017).

Improving health outcomes and encouraging academic attainment were two main components of the initiative (Amenumey, et al., 2020), which served to fill in gaps in student supports and provide the student parents with knowledge and strategies to help them be better students and parents. Staff at the nine student parent support centers were trained regularly using federal funding to provide the best assistance that they could to the students at their schools (Minnesota Department of Health, 2020). Staff at these centers offered free, voluntary assessments and referrals for academic needs (such as tutoring help, resource needs, laptops, and financial aid), and health screenings for depression, intimate partner violence, and tobacco and alcohol abuse. After completing the assessments, a staff member could make referrals to campus or community-based health services, other campus offices, and social services, including child care subsidies, county assistance, Medicaid, etc. (Minnesota Department of Health, 2020). They attempted to provide direct or referral access to material support such as food and clothing and child health supports, lactation rooms on campus, well child visits, and child care to student

parents and their families. At Saint Cloud State University, the work of Student Parent Support to provide what students need to be successful includes providing food, refreshments, diapers, and other essentials to individuals. In the distribution of resources to students, the Student Parent Support office was able to form connections with these students, who, in some cases, continued to be involved with Student Parent Support after receiving initial resources and have become active members of the non-traditional student community.

The specially designated area for nursing mothers was a major step for many student parents to having greater equity on their college campus. Establishment of lactation rooms was beneficial for the students at the time, but also after the initiative had ended in 2017. Future students at these institutions were able to benefit from the legacy of MSPSI in that capacity. At Saint Cloud State University, there are six lactation spaces for use by students and staff (Saint Cloud State University, 2022).

The Minnesota Student Parent Support Initiative is no longer an active program, but during its operation, it demonstrated a benefit to participating student parents with an average 70 percent re-enrolling for the upcoming semester during years 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 (Minnesota Department of Health, 2020). During the 2013-2017 grant cycle, nine institutions received a total of \$4,399,227 and during the 2016-2017 school year, the program supported 974 unique student parents and 1,571 children (Minnesota Department of Health, 2020). The initiative laid a foundation at these institutions on which future programs could be built thanks to the focus on sustainability by the Minnesota Department of Education and the Minnesota Department of Health to train staff at the institutions directly in skills essential to the work in supporting student parents, transfer necessary data and information to the student parent centers

from the state level, and encourage the continuation of programming by providing additional funding as institutions secured capital needed (Amenumey, et al., 2020).

### **Head Start**

Head Start is the largest early care and education program in the United States, providing low-income families free early childhood care and education for children ages three to five and additional family support services (Navarro-Cruz, et al., 2022). The Administration for Children and Families within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is the administrator of the national Head Start program, which in the 2021 fiscal year was granted \$10.3 billion in federal funding for an enrollment of 839,116 individuals (Administration for Children and Families, 2022).

Head Start has a collaboration with higher education institutions to bring child care closer to campuses, specifically two-year community and technical colleges (Gault, et al., 2019). This partnership benefits all three major players. Student parents have better quality care made more accessible, the institution likely boosts retention among student parents and can enrich the educational experience of students by offering field experiences and internships in early childhood education (Yu, 2015), and Head Start succeeds in enrolling more children and drawing educated employees from the institution (Navarro-Cruz, et al., 2022). With the declining number of on-campus child care facilities, Head Start fills the gap that exists in numerous post-secondary schools (Gault, et al., 2019), but some argue that the program is too focused on low-income families who already receive support from other agencies while families who fall just shy of qualifying for care are left scrambling (Landivar, et al., 2022). In Minnesota, just over 12,000 people, including children, received programming through Head Start in 2021 (Administration for Children and Families, 2022).

### **Child Care Access Means Parents in School Grant**

The Child Care Access Means Parents In School (CCAMPIS) grant became a federal program in 1998 and the first funds were distributed the following year. This grant was created to aid low-income post-secondary student parents by disbursing grants for child care services while the parent completed their education (Higher Education Amendments of 1998). The category *low-income* in this context implies that the student is eligible for the Pell grant or would be if not for one of a few reasons (United States Department of Education, 2022) Students who are pursuing a graduate or professional degree are not eligible for Pell, but would be for CCAMPIS if requirements for income are met. The same is true if the parent is not a United States citizen. In September 2021, a collection of educational entities including postsecondary institutions, children’s advocacy groups, student support organizations, and groups supporting equity in education wrote a letter to ask for a funding increase of \$500 million to expand the work of CCAMPIS to assist more student families across the country. It followed a presentation of a reauthorization of the CCAMPIS grant to Congress in August 2021 (CCAMPIS Reauthorization Act, 2021). As of February 2023, legislation on this act has not been voted on, but on March 15, 2022, President Biden signed the *Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022* into law. Among many other facets of this law is an increase in funding for CCAMPIS awards from the previous maximum amount of one percent of an institution’s Pell award funding to three percent and allowed for a new grant minimum of \$90,000, triple the prior minimum of \$30,000 (Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022).

Institutions soon saw this major increase in funding dollars. During the previous four-year grant cycle from 2018-2019 to 2021-2022, Saint Cloud State University received \$156,898.00 each fiscal year (United States Department of Education, 2023). For 2022-2023, the

school received \$347,360.00. Brittany Sullivan, the current principal investigator, shared by email that the current school year's funding has provided CCAMPIS grants to 12 student parents in fall semester 2022 and 17 student parents in spring semester 2023 (Sullivan, 2023). In comparison, during fall semester 2018, 32 student parents were provided grants and 37 student parents were in the following spring (Mergen, 2019). It is worth remembering that the cost of child care has risen even in the last few years (Werner, 2022), which means that the cost of attendance/child is higher than previous semesters. Another variable is the number of additional child care monies a family may qualify for to bring costs down. Some families with children enrolled at Lindgren Early Learning Center at Saint Cloud State University receive county subsidies, Child Care Assistance Program funds, Pathways scholarships, and more, which reduce the cost of care (Lindgren Child Care Center & Minnesota Student Parent Support Initiative, 2019). The CCAMPIS grant at Saint Cloud State University was written mindfully so that student parents would be expected to be active in academics and social engagement with the institution (Mergen, 2018) and the role of Student Parent Support would be much more than merely an intermediary between the United States Department of Education and parents to deliver funds. The role of Student Parent Support in CCAMPIS is to provide support to the families who are receiving the grant, whether that be through answering class or schedule-related questions, providing social-emotional support, or assisting in finding financial resources (Mergen, 2018).

### **Support Services**

Student parents have particular needs from education support services (Dayne, et al., 2021). It is challenging to be a student with these two highly demanding roles, which require support and guidance that may differ from classmates (Hermon & Davis, 2004).

It is important to remember that not all families, and therefore not all student parents, have their own computers or access to internet at home. Although the Covid-19 pandemic precipitated a greater necessity for home internet, there is still an economic divide between those who own computers and those who only use smartphones in their home (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). For those without a computer, study schedules become more complex needing to factor in time to do homework and write papers on campus, the public library, or elsewhere. During the pandemic, some student parents and their school-age children faced an equity challenge of not having the necessary technology for distance learning (Reichlin Cruse, et al., 2020). One of projects implemented at Saint Cloud State University was a cooperation between Student Parent Support and the Saint Cloud State University Information Technology department (Mergen, 2018) to lend laptops to student parents who requested them for a semester. This technology assistance allowed those who took advantage of the opportunity with greater ability to finish assignments, study off-campus, and spend more time with family. One student thanked Student Parent Support later, describing how she was able to take an online class when that would otherwise have been very difficult.

The lack of access to technology based on financial limitations became a glaring issue during the Covid-19 pandemic and the worst equity concerns were among rural populations, people of color, those in transitional housing, and homeless individuals (United States Department of Education, 2021). Students from kindergarten through college struggled to learn remotely when internet access and electronic devices had to be purchased in advance of any educational pursuits (Reichlin Cruse, et al., 2020). Thankfully, many school districts and administrators recognized the growing inequities and communities had resources available to provide technology assistance and to offer a free and reduced lunch while school buildings were



closed (United States Department of Education, 2021). During the summer of 2021, it was projected that approximately 360,000 Minnesotan children under age five and youth in high school through kindergarten who qualified for free and reduced lunch, would receive money from the national government as part of the nutrition assistance program, Pandemic-Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT) (United States Department of Agriculture, 2020). The pandemic placed an additional burden on student parents who were now home and trying to facilitate distance learning for their children as well as themselves (Reichlin Cruse, et al., 2020).

### **Legal protection for student parents**

Many steps have been taken through past legislation to make postsecondary education more feasible for pregnant and parenting students. The landmark Title IX of 1974 states: “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (US Department of Education: Office for Civil Rights, 2013). This protection extends to all aspects of pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding. Under Title IX, students have a right to be excused from class with medical notes and they must be allowed opportunities to make up any course material or assignments that they missed due to pregnancy, childbirth, or caring for a child. Many states, including Minnesota, have individual state laws to re-enforce areas of particular importance to lawmakers and the people of that state.

In 2017, the Minnesota Legislature passed a new statute which requires both public and private, regionally accredited postsecondary institutions to “provide information according to this section to students who are parents of one or more children age 12 or younger, and to students who notify the institution that they are pregnant” (MN Stat § 135A.158, 2017). The information must include a fact sheet on the legal rights of student parents and pregnant students

and a list of resources to support student parents and pregnant students. The list of resources may include resources for prenatal care, child care, transportation, and housing. This information must be available in languages that reflect the primary languages of the institution's student body (MN Stat § 135A.158, 2017). This statute arms students with information on their Title IX rights along with a wealth of knowledge. It is common for student parents to express difficulty in finding resources on campuses and in local communities (Dayne, et al., 2021). Both are crucial pieces to have in a student parent's wheelhouse as they make their path through to graduation. Whether or not more resources will be enough to provide an additional boost to propel student parents towards graduation cannot be predicted, but providing this information could make a difference.

### **Retention of student parents**

Persistence is when a student remains enrolled but may transfer to a different institution from the one where initial enrollment took place (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). While this is not the best scenario for the institution the student is leaving, the individual may have found a place which will better serve them educationally, financially, etc. In one of the most common types of persistence, students may choose to take general education courses at a two-year institution, where tuition is typically less expensive, before transferring to a larger institution to pursue a bachelor's degree (Chen & Hossler, 2017). Retention is when a student remains enrolled at the same institution for the entire course of their degree program (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). Institutions focus efforts more on retention, because keeping the students who have already committed is an easier and more sustainable task than wagering that other students will want to leave their current institution. Regardless of whether a student parent remains enrolled in the same institution or transfers

sometime during school, the determination to continue taking courses is what matters (Navarro-Cruz, et al., 2022) in achieving a degree.

Not surprisingly, the major obstacle to retention among student parents is child care (Noll, et al., 2017). Looking beyond that barrier, institutions can do more in other areas to boost numbers of student parents returning each semester (Springer, et al., 2009). Higher education institutions typically have sports teams, extracurriculars, and student organizations for students to have opportunities to form social connections and engage with peers in activities outside of the classrooms (Freeman, 2004). Students, both parents and not, earn better grades and are more likely to continue courses if a community has been found or a sense of belonging created (O'Meara, et al., 2017).

Furthermore, students who have higher engagement both academically and socially are more likely to experience a social concept called *mattering*, which increases self-esteem, confidence in goals, and retention (Stebbleton, et al., 2010). Sociologists Rosenberg and McCullough coined the term *mattering* as the way one feels that others depend on, are interested in, are concerned with the person's well-being (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Undergraduate students tend to form these types of relationships with other students (Stebbleton, et al., 2010) and student parents are more likely to create these bonds with other student parents.

Being a student parent is not socially normative on college campuses (Springer, et al., 2009), which can lead to additional levels of stress and uncertainty for the parent, who is already facing challenges unknown to traditional students (Hermon & Davis, 2004). A lack of belonging or inclusion may cause a student parent to question pursuing a degree (Scharp, et al., 2021). Providing opportunities for engagement can result in greater retention for students who are contemplating withdrawing from school (Sprandel, 1985). Due to the high intersectionality of

student parenting (Crenshaw, 2011) with other variables, such as being a racial minority, a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, a first-generation college student, etc., these students are more likely to struggle in college and statistically are more likely to leave college before completing their degree (Wladis, et al, 2018).

Another way that student parents felt greater support from their university was by more family-friendly events and greater opportunities for bringing their families to campus (Dayne, et al., 2021). It is important for institutions to recognize that student parents, like other college students, want to experience mattering to the individuals in their academic environment as well as home relationships (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Student parents wanting to establish a self-identity and wishing to merge home and school spheres are not unique to a single institution. Student parents have two complex, distinct identities: student and parent. However, these identities are complexly interwoven and intersectional (Crenshaw, 2011), not a simple Venn diagram with a small overlap between the circles. The uncertainty of self-identity that a student parent may feel is valid, especially since both parents and students separately report high levels of misgivings about their role (Scharp, et al., 2021). The school, on the other hand, should be ready to embrace the family of a student parent and reinforce the importance of lifelong learning.

Engagement between institution and students is fostered through social and academic integration (Yu, 2015). Having relevant resources collected in one location for student parents is beneficial to them, especially when they are short on time or unfamiliar with the university's amenities (Dayne, et al., 2021). Information on academics, financial aid, time management, parenting, and other topics relevant to members of the demographic are helpful, especially those who are also first-generation students (Spitzig & Renner, 2022). At Saint Cloud State University, bulletin boards as well as emails and social media posts by Student Parent Support helped to

enlighten student parents about this variety of topics. Programming hosted by on-campus organizations and off-campus events, which may be applicable to the student parents were shared by similar methods as well.

### **Measuring Success**

The CCAMPIS Grant uses persistence measures and degree completion rates to judge the efficacy of an institution's program for student parents and whether the dissemination of funds is proving integral to students succeeding academically (United States Department of Education, 2022). In this case, persistence, and not retention, is used as a measurement for judging how effectively a program is functioning. The goal of the grant is to help low-income student parents achieve academic degrees by providing the funding for child care. Whether the student graduates from the initial school attended is less important than if the student graduates with a degree (Pusser, et al., 2007).

Persistence may be bolstered by looking toward the future and imagining life after graduation. Having personal goals and high expectations help student parents endure the stress of being a college student because they want to be able to provide more for their families (Rosenbaum, et al., 2009). Though often arduous, college is temporary and the anticipation of graduation with its sense of accomplishment and validation can be a source of motivation for students struggling to continue (Sprandel, 1985).

One or more parent's post-secondary education attainment has a proximal affect of benefitting the family in their current and near future wellbeing, but it also benefits the family into the future by instilling an intergenerational appreciation and focus on completing post-secondary degrees (Dotterer, et al.; 2021). A completed degree also provides an opportunity for

greater earning potential with income increasing after each subsequent degree earned (Shrider, et al., 2021).

At the same time student parents are striving to attain degrees while balancing family, educational, and personal needs, their young children require quality child care to support intellectual, physical, and emotional development (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2020). CCAMPIS and other programs offer aid when the financial burden of child care costs become a barrier in front of families who are attempting to elevate themselves through education and the better employment possibilities that accompany it (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2018).

### **Literature Review Summary**

There is a sizeable body of research on each of the broad topic areas covered in this paper. Unfortunately, a noticeable lack of information is available when the intersectionality of these terms is examined. Significant data has been collected by the Institute of Women's Policy and Research on the topic of student parents, specifically mothers and single mothers who are parents. This work is important as most student parents are women (Cruse, et al., 2019). The number of mothers who begin school but fail to reach graduation was astonishing and confirmed the need for additional support of this group beyond that given to traditional students. Having worked with this demographic, I was aware of the considerable obstacles student parents faced, but I did not recognize the high chances of withdrawal. The research for this paper has fortified my convictions even more that low-income student parents need to be afforded the opportunity to seek postsecondary education.

### **Chapter III: Results**

In the American workforce, having education beyond a high school level is increasingly important for job security and earning an income to support a family (Long, 2009). With the rising cost of child care and the high percentage of the demographic with children under the age of five years old (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2020), programs to assist in lowering or eliminating student parents' child care costs is vital in getting students enrolled (Minnesota HF 13, 2023). The CCAMPIS program has done necessary work on this front in getting children into high-quality child care and parents into classrooms, but with child care centers on campuses around the United States closing (Navarro-Cruz, et al., 2022), additional collaboration is essential. The potential for stronger partnership with Head Start could provide student parents, particularly those who attend community colleges (Spitzig & Renner, 2022), and qualify for CCAMPIS with more options for child care (Gault, et al., 2019).

### **Conclusions**

This section will address and answer each research question posed in chapter one separately.

#### *1. What are the needs and challenges of student parents in higher education?*

Student parents need time, childcare, and support services. Student parents do not have the same time available for education as classmates without children (Wladis, et al., 2018), because a significant portion of a student parent's day is spent not studying or in class, but instead providing direct care. Single student mothers spend an average of nine hours each day providing care and doing housework (Gault, et al., 2018) in addition to any school work or employment.

Child care is a need for many student parents, but with fewer care options after the Covid 19 pandemic, the urgency for safe, reliable care is even greater (Reichlin Cruse, et al., 2020). The challenge of child care is two-fold, because it first must be located, then paid for.

Minnesota is struggling to battle a growing gap in child care options as many family care centers closed in the last two years (Werner, 2022). The number of on-campus child care centers at postsecondary institutions across the United States are also declining (Cruse, et al., 2018), which does not support the needs of student parent families and places greater pressure on students to find other types of care. Saint Cloud State University is fortunate to have Lindgren Early Learning Center, a NAEYC accredited child care center, on campus to provide services for the children of students (Mergen, 2019). Unfortunately, the number of spots available does not match the need of student parents enrolled, nor does it provide the possibility for after-school care of school-age children or drop-in care for children who are not enrolled when other options fall through (Mergen, 2018). Having a safety net for child care emergencies takes a burden off the parent to seek out care last minute to avoid double-booking for parenting and school.

A significant downfall of on-campus child care centers is their lack of visual presence in publicity to potential families (United States Government Accountability Office, 2019). Often students with children are unaware of the presence of a care option at their institution or potential child care funding assistance that may be available (Dayne, et al., 2021). Knowing the burden already on the shoulders of student parents, institutions and student parent support programs should be upfront about services which may be a lifeline for these families (United States Government Accountability Office, 2019).



Engagement with peers and the institution is another element of education which plays a part in a student determining the value of continuing their education (O'Keefe, 2013). Having uncertainty about attendance, time away from children, or identity confusion are all common among student parents, especially those with younger children (Scharp, et al., 2021). Coupling this trepidation with the higher rate of drop-out among members of racial or ethnic minorities, the LGBTQIA+ community, first-generation college students, veterans, etc., the intersectionality of challenges can be overwhelming for students (Crenshaw, 2011).

*2. What are the benefits of the CCAMPIS grant and Student Parent Support services?*

Non-traditional students who are able to form social connections with peers are more likely to remain enrolled (O'Meara, et al., 2017). Institutions which can provide students with support to engage with peers, be successful academically, and maintain a school-home balance can anticipate higher retention and graduation rates among student parents (Kuh, et al., 2007). Student parent support services can work to develop opportunities for social engagement among student parents. This type of interaction with peers can be beneficial to student parents who may not know other student parents at their institution or any institution, which can be a source of loneliness (Dotterer, et al., 2021), especially if the student does not have support from family to pursue education.

Student parent centers play an important role in providing resources and giving referrals to help individuals' needs be met (Minnesota Department of Health, 2020). Having a support center available for student parents with a staff knowledgeable about local child care options can be an aid to families needing care. Child care centers on college and university campuses provide an invaluable service to student parents. These centers also benefit children as they are typically

high-quality settings (Cruse, et al., 2018) with the opportunity for care that low-income families would otherwise be unable to afford.

Nationally, the Child Care Access Means Parents In Schools Program is working to get low-income students, particularly single mothers (United States Department of Education, 2022) enrolled in postsecondary education with child care costs covered. Renewed funding to this program ensures that more families will be able to obtain care for their young children (Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022). At Saint Cloud State University, the CCAMPIS grant continues to support the student families who qualify. Children receive quality care at Lindgren Early Learning Center, while parents attend classes and have a much lighter financial burden with the government providing the funds to cover the cost of care.

*3. What are the obstacles to implementing CCAMPIS programming on university campuses?*

One challenge to implementing CCAMPIS programming is funding. Although recent legislation has increased the federal grant dollars available (Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022), the amount of funding that institutions have for support services is limited (Amenumey, et al., 2020). At most institutions, the majority of attention, money, and programming goes to student engagement and retention of traditional students (Spitzig & Renner, 2022). While retaining those students is important, non-traditional students, including student parents, have greater odds of leaving school before earning a degree (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). A shift in institutional and national mindset is necessary to bring the often-overlooked group into the forefront of conversations about how programming can suit their needs. Without support from administration within the university

structure, it can be challenging for an office or college program to work for a demographic of students that demands constant advocacy and support (Gault, et al., 2019).

### **Discussion and Reflections**

With a disparity of approximately \$18,000 annually (United States Census Bureau, 2021), single fathers are bringing in more income than single mothers. More women in the United States are supporting families independent from a spouse. The strong correlation between educational attainment and income makes it necessary for many women to enter the classroom to secure financial stability (Kruvelis, et al., 2017). This migration to campuses is evident by the fact that 2.7 million or 70 percent of student parents are women (Cruse, et al., 2019). Although many women return to school or begin a new level of education, having children can be a gamechanger for women who planned to pursue further academic degrees than a bachelor's or associate degree. Statistically, women who have children are less likely than men, even men with children, to earn master's degrees or PhDs (National Research Council, 2001) particularly, in the fields of math and science. Women continue to earn 83 percent of what men earn in full-time, year-round employment (United States Census Bureau, 2021). In terms of employment, the gender lines become more apparent as fewer women have the academic qualifications presumed for positions with higher salaries. Often women become stuck within a certain wage bracket unless additional education is attained (Landivar, et al., 2022).

Despite the low completion rate, women continue to enroll in postsecondary education in large numbers, which is often precipitated by a need to procure economic security for the family (Springer, Parker, & Leivten-Reid, 2009). With the overlapping identities of mother, student, and more (Scharp, et al., 2021), and the higher probability of the student parent being a single mother (Cruse, et al., 2019), it is clear that students who are single mothers are among the

highest needs students. For this reason, the emphasis being placed on supporting these women through the CCAMPIS grant (United States Department of Education, 2022) will aid the students and their families in immeasurable ways.

### **Recommendations for Research**

A gap in research exists in national data on the effect that access to child care and child care grants have on student parents. There is demographic data available on the correlation between Head Start programs and employment attainment of parents, but this does not speak to more fundamental issues (Landivar, et al., 2022). It would be valuable to analyze institutional data on student parent status and outcomes to better understand student parents' experiences during and after college, and to assess an institution's progress toward making education accessible and affordable for parents. Higher education institutions need to be made aware of the positive and negative experiences of student parents enrolled in courses. By ignoring the existence of non-traditional students, institutions are not providing the types of support crucial for recruiting, retaining, and graduating students of diverse backgrounds (Margarit & Kennedy, 2019).

Researchers should conduct rigorous evaluations of student parent support services and campus child care programs to better understand and identify best practices and their impact on student parents' persistence and completion rates. The low graduation completion rate, especially among single mothers (Gault, et al., 2018), as well as the low motivation rate among student parents of young children (Lovell, 2014) are two topics that require greater attention by researchers. It is imperative for student parents that the programs and institutions which support continued education, recognize issues hindering degree completion and work on problem-solving efforts to bring down the high drop-out rate (Margarit & Kennedy, 2019).

Studies done on the stress and time factors that impact postsecondary students in general should consider the diversity of family structures in students' households by adding items like *caring for dependent children* to surveys done on time usage (Kuh, et al., 2007). By including parenting and caregiving tasks on more postsecondary materials, institutions and organizations can help normalize the daily reality of one in four students. More research is needed on this demographic, specifically on time management and stress (Crispin & Nikolaou, 2019) so that causation can be studied to see what relationships exist between the variables in a student parent's life.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Higher education institutions need to take the role of support staff for non-traditional students seriously. As more students are entering colleges and universities with diverse backgrounds and unique situations (United States Department of Education, 2021), attention must be given to welcome, encourage, and retain each student who enrolls. Students do not have identical paths to graduation (Hermon & Davis, 2004). Some are fortunate to have a quick, clear journey, but others have additional roadblocks which threaten whether the destination will ever be reached. The way for some students may stop and start again, but having moral support and a strong motivating force, the goal can be achieved. Non-traditional students on average have higher levels of drive to complete educational goals than traditional students (Hermon & Davis, 2004), which is logical given the commitment necessary to enter school later in life.

Postsecondary institutions and the child care centers on campuses must rethink how student parents receive information about care options and the funds available to support attendance (Springer, et al., 2009). It is not equitable that student parents are missing opportunities which could be of significant benefit to their families simply due to a lack of

forethought about marketing to potential families (Dayne, et al., 2021). Child care centers are a boon to an institution and should be highlighted by campus tours, publications, and admission offices (Wladis, et al., 2018). This is true even if that center has a wait list. If an institution has grants available which could help off-set the cost of care for families of low-income (United States Government Accountability Office, 2019), this may allow a student parent the option to enroll when it was otherwise impossible. Even if an institution does not have their own child care center, providing information about other child care options in the area is also helpful (Navarro-Cruz, et al., 2022). Students may be moving to the area from out of state or even another country and having some of this research done in advance is supportive and demonstrates care. This type of consideration for student parents' needs displays that an institution values them and recognizes sacrifices being made for the student to be enrolled (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981).

By surveying student parents about child care needs, child care centers could see the areas where child care is lacking. This would provide insight into where funding dollars would be best applied. Evening care is often challenging for parents to procure, but necessary if one is enrolled in a night class (Mergen, 2018). Directing funds to hire evening child care employees might fulfill a major need, but this need will go unnoticed unless student parents are consulted.

Research has shown that not having the support of their co-parent greatly increases a student parent's likelihood for distress in the relationship with their children, for higher stress overall, and ultimately, greater likelihood of dropping out entirely (Dotterer, et al., 2021). For this reason, programming which reduces stress and promotes positive co-parenting relationships can be a somewhat unlikely way to encourage retention (Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2019). Creating peer student parent groups may help develop a sense of community (O'Meara, et al.,

2017), especially for those who otherwise lack social support from friends who are parents (Navarro-Cruz, et al., 2022). Offering informal parent education classes would allow student parents the opportunity to develop parenting skills, while meeting peers with a common student experience. Classes should be free and open to anyone who wishes to attend. If child care could be offered during class time, this may encourage attendance by parents otherwise reluctant to participate.

Having an area on-campus for student parents to bring their children while they can study is a request of many parents (Dayne, et al., 2021). This space would consist of a safe, age-appropriate play environment for children with an adjacent quiet room for studying. Having a set-up like this provides families with the opportunity for the student parent to complete assignments while supervising children. Such a setting provides an alternative to childcare and another place to study when home is not an option. Miller Library at St. Cloud State University, in cooperation Lindgren Early Learning Center, opened a study room in October 2022 to offer a greatly-needed place on-campus for student parents to bring their children when the student needs to complete assignments, study, or meet with small groups (Dwyer, 2022). This space is a step towards normalizing the student parent college experience.

There needs to be greater access to child care on campuses across the United States, specifically at community and technical colleges where the largest percentage (44 percent) of single mothers (Kruvelis, et al., 2017) study compared to other types of institutions. Lengthy waitlists at the current on-campus child care centers would be shortened by bolstering resources available to hire and retain larger staffs (Gault, et al., 2019) and increase child capacity while keeping the high standard of care that such centers are known for (United States Department of Education, 2022). Low-income student parents need to have greater possibility to enroll children

in high-quality care with little or no additional expense to the family as this metric is directly tied to parental postsecondary persistence and on-time graduation (Cruse, et al., 2018). Greater access to funding by not placing time limits and course-load requirements (Wladis, et al., 2018) on financial aid for student parents will allow for better balance of school and home life without artificial pressure to keep to an idealized and perhaps unreasonable (Dotterer, et, all., 2021) standard of academic performance.

In addition to increasing availability of on-campus care, student parent support centers should work to help parents connect with other child care centers which might be of benefit (Navarro-Cruz, et al., 2022). By providing student parents with needed support across multiple identities (Scharp, et al., 2021) institutions demonstrate an acceptance of non-traditional students, which fosters a greater sense of belonging (Stebbleton, et al., 2010). Student parents have demonstrated an ability to succeed regardless of the barriers in the path to graduation, but offering help with child care and academic support can allow for a smoother journey with fewer potential pitfalls.



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