Assessing the Needs of Single Mothers Attending College

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Introduction

Today, there is a diverse range of students on college campuses. We have specific programs for these groups – Offices of Veterans Affairs; Women’s Centers; Centers for International Students; and many more. These offices are helpful in making underrepresented student groups feel a better sense of identity within the larger context of the campus community. In this study, we were hoping to identify resources that colleges, specifically community colleges, are using to meet the needs of single mothers. The overarching question of the study was how are the needs of single mothers being met on the college campus? Surprisingly, there has been little research conducted on this sub-population as noted in the literature review. From the research conducted in this study, new information was gleaned about single mothers and meeting their needs on the community college campus.

Literature Review

It is difficult to state the actual number of single parents enrolled in college let alone the number of single mothers attending community college. This is in large part because the statistics that are gathered by the “National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) likely underreport the presence of parents by limiting the definition of ‘parent’ to students claiming financial responsibility for one or more children” (Goldrick-Rab & Sorenson, 2010, p. 180). As the authors (2010) acknowledge, research of single parents is only in the beginning stages (p. 180). There is a growing need to identify this student population, learn about their needs and address their needs on the college campus, especially the community college campus which are “in a position to provide interventions designed to meet the particular needs” (Ray, Bratton, & Brandt, 2000, p. 469) of this population.

Single parents are a rapidly growing population in this country (Ray et al., 2000, p. 470). Take for example that in 1960 “single parents with children headed about 11 [percent] of families; by 1999, the number was over 20 [percent]” (Zhan & Pandey, 2004, p. 661). Another way to look at this is the
fact that there are “over 8.5 million families with children under 18 years of age [which] are headed by single parents” (Ray et al., 2000, p. 470).

Many authors site the fact that in 1996 the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) was passed. This law removed many of the social welfare benefits and in essence, put single mothers at a great disadvantage. One of the greatest changes that occurred as a result of this act was that states were limited to providing only 20 percent of the welfare population with benefits to attend school. Included in this number are welfare recipients attending secondary school and postsecondary education (Duquaine-Watson, 2007, p. 230).

With all of this happening it is easy to imagine that single mothers are under increasing pressure. There is a growing number in this population and much of their funding and support has been diminished. Ray et al. (2000) identified the stresses that single parents experience including problems with “role overload, social isolation, emotional and psychological problems, economic difficulties, time shortages, child care, and lack of parenting support (p. 470). There are many techniques colleges are using to meet the needs of this growing population. In the final part of this literature review examples are given of programs currently being used on college campuses to reach single parents.

At Cuyahoga Community College in Ohio, Dr. Barbara A. Taylor and Dr. Phyllis J. Dukes (2004) piloted an eight-week workshop designed to help single parents on their Metropolitan Campus. The workshop addressed parenting skills and gave single parents a place to talk about their experience and any difficulties they were facing. Taylor and Dukes (2004) found that the “responses showed that most of the students lacked social support, knowledge of community resources and child-development information” (p. 4). The program was so successful that the originally non-credit workshop was turned into a workshop for which students could earn college credit.

While difficult for many community colleges to attain, some four-year colleges are adding housing specifically for single parents. The president of Endicott College in Massachusetts initiated the
program “Keys to Degrees.” With this program, he created a residence hall with a wing devoted to single parents where they can live with their children. Additional support is provided including “academic support and counseling” (A.M., 2010, p. 21). Through a grant the program was able to spread to Eastern Michigan University where the setup is similar to that of Endicott College with “tutoring and workshops … being mandatory” (A.M., 2010, p. 21). As President Wylie of Endicott College states in the article, “Single parents ‘shouldn’t have to step out of education, or take seven years attending at night, or rely on parents or the state to support them’” (A.M., 2010, p. 21). As stated at the beginning, housing may be difficult for community colleges to offer, but since housing on community college campuses is an up-and-coming trend, this could be an idea in the future.

Identifying the needs of single mothers is much needed on today’s college campus. Not only will reaching out to these students help the college in their recruitment and retention efforts, it will help these women make a better life for themselves and their children. As Duquaine-Watson (2007) states, “access to higher education increases the earning potential and likelihood of self-sufficiency for women of all races, reduces the average amount of time poor women remain on welfare, and decreases poverty rates among female-headed households by more than half” (p. 230). Helping students attain the skills and attributes like those listed above are all goals colleges should hope to reach for, and through better assessing the needs of single mothers colleges can do.

Sample Description

The population we identified for the purpose of our study were single mothers attending the Greene Center of Clark State Community College in Beavercreek, Ohio. This group of students was chosen because we were specifically trying to address the needs of single mothers attending a community college, and the women asked were both single mothers and were attending a community college.
Data Collection Method

Christina printed off a sheet with just the four questions listed on them and handed it out to the four people who responded. They are identified by numbers for each response to maintain anonymity. The recipients wrote out their own responses; they weren't written out by Christina. Christina attempted to correct the spelling from the fourth respondent, but kept all other grammar the same. A sheet with the following four questions was handed to students:

1) Can you talk a little bit about your experience as a single mother in college?
2) What has been most challenging being a single mother attending college?
3) What service(s) do you wish Clark State Greene Center offered?
4) What would make your life easier being a single mother attending college?

Data Analysis Method

Please see Appendix A..

Findings/Data Display

Can you talk a little bit about your experience as a single mother in college?

- Helps to be a better parent: 28%
- Effectively managing time: 29%
- Student support services: 43%
What has been most challenging being a single mother attending college?

- Time management: 100%

What service(s) do you wish Clark State Greene Center offered?

- Childcare: 33%
- More student support: 34%
- Better physical atmosphere: 33%

What would make your life easier being a single mother attending college?

- Childcare: 75%
- Online course offerings: 25%
The findings revolved around two central themes the needs single mothers face with regards to childcare services and developing time management skills. These two themes continuously were addressed by the single mothers in their responses. Based on the national statistic that over ten percent of college students are single parents, there may be a need in the future to provide more specified services for this group. Childcare, while costly for the college to undertake can be used by multiple individuals on the campus, not only students with children, but also staff and faculty who may be able to use the service.

Data Validation

While we individually coded our results, we discussed our method for doing so as a group. We decided to look for themes that arose after initially looking at the responses and then look for themes that arose from the initial findings. By doing this we not only reflected on this process as a group, we also created a way to code the data in a way that addressed the most recurring themes brought up by the participants.

Discussion

It was very interesting how thoughtfully the participants were able to answer the questions posed – they gave answers with a lot of depth and passion. As stated above, the two most recurring themes were the need to address time management skills and childcare services. However, the idea that these
single mothers felt they were acting as better role models for their children was also repeated. This is very important to recognize, because as student affairs professionals, we often think solely of the individual student whereas with this particular group of our population, we may be having more of a direct impact on future generations than with other groups.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Single mothers, and more broadly single parents, have specific needs whose solutions will be of benefit to them and the campus overall. The quantitative data identified in the literature review and the statistics from the National Center for Education Statistics, both reveal that single parents are a sizeable and growing group on our college campuses. From our survey, we found that single mothers are able to easily identify needs they feel should be addressed by colleges. Furthermore, some of their requests are very manageable such as providing time management workshops. It would be beneficial to conduct this research, perhaps with more breadth to the survey, across many more community college campuses and to more single mothers. It may also be beneficial to expand the survey and give it to single fathers as well. Overall, I believe this is a student population which deserves closer attention.
References


