Welcoming Spaces: Supporting Parenting Students at the Academic Library

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A B S T R A C T

Academic libraries serve many student constituents, but one often overlooked group is students who are parenting children. Students who, by necessity or volition, bring their children with them to the library have specific needs. Serving these students, who often have difficulty succeeding and graduating at college, should be a priority for academic libraries. Offering assistance can help this group focus on their studies, achieve their academic goals, and thus decrease universities' attrition rates. This article begins by drawing on anecdotal evidence, then reviews existing literature on parenting students. Next, it examines and analyzes policies on children in academic libraries at large American universities. Half of all academic libraries don't have clearly accessible policies, and some have policies that discourage bringing supervised children to libraries, while a few have welcoming policies and facilities. This research shows that academic libraries can still make progress to serve a key constituency. Finally, it offers solutions for how academic libraries can serve parenting students, given varying spatial and financial constraints, as well as diffusing potential concerns that might hold academic libraries back from serving this part of the academic community. This analysis could be supplemented by further inquiry and interviews with libraries on how their policies were developed and are being implemented or with parenting students on what they desire and need from the academic library.

Introduction

Anecdotal and observed evidence from librarians and staff at the Circulation Desk and Reference Desk at Albertsons Library at Boise State University suggests the presence of parenting students. Circulation staff say they receive noise complaints from non-parenting students who don't think children should be allowed in the library. Likewise, when discussing this research topic with a colleague, she told me that just that day she'd had a male student, accompanied by two kids, come to the Reference Desk to ask about our library's policy on children–he wanted to know if he was even allowed to enter the library with them.

In laying the groundwork for this and future research, I approached students who came in to the library accompanied by children to see if they would be willing to participate in a future focus group discussion. One response from a woman stands out most in my mind: she was using a library computer, struggling to type while also dealing with a wiggly toddler sitting on her lap. On the floor next to them was a baby in a car seat who was happily babbling and laughing. They were not being overly loud and they were on the first floor, which in our library is a noisier and collaborative floor, not a quiet study space. I saw this woman from my office and went out to talk to her and to see if I could maybe lend a hand with the kids briefly while she completed her work. She saw me walking toward her and the look on her face was panicked

as she attempted to type faster. "I'm really sorry about him" she said, indicating the baby, as I approached, "I'm almost done here. We'll get out of here soon, I promise. I just need to get this paper printed and turned in." I quickly reassured her that I was coming over, not to chastise her or shush her children, but to make sure she knew she (and her children) were welcome in the library and to see if I could help her at all.

Her relief was palpable and it forced me to realize just how unwelcoming the library can seem to parenting students. She assumed that I was coming to reprimand her when she was trying to complete a task dozens of students do in the library every day: finishing a paper and printing it before class. She was already being forced to accommodate our space: she had her toddler on her lap, and the car seat on the floor, shoved close to the chair; she'd have to take both children with her to walk across the first floor to the printer; she was trying to keep both kids occupied and entertained while also typing. Conversely, our library had made no visible effort to accommodate her needs.

The data suggests that this woman is not alone. A report by the Institute for Women's Policy Research analyzing federal education data (gathered by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics) found that "as of 2012, 4.8 million independent college students had their own dependent children, comprising nearly 26 percent of the total college population" (Gault, Reichlin, & Roman, 2014, p. 4). I will refer to these students as "parenting students."

Parenting students are a significant population on many, if not most, university campuses, and being a parenting student has direct and immediate impact on attrition rates. The academic library is uniquely situated to make small changes to its space and/or policies to support parenting students' ability to balance school and family, and ultimately successfully complete their studies. This paper explores what services academic libraries are currently offering parenting students, how widely they are offered, and to suggest best practices for the academic library to adopt in order to support parenting students and lower attrition rates.

Literature review

Academic librarians and administrators may raise questions and doubts about making space for families in academic libraries. When funding and library space are tight, why bother allocating resources to support this specific group of students? Why do parents bring their children with them to the academic library in the first place? Why don't they find child care when they need to get schoolwork done? Aren't there many other student groups that might want special seating or accommodations in the library?

To answer that final question: perhaps, but the number of parenting students is quite large and they face numerous challenges in successfully completing their studies. In addition, the 26% of students trying to balance a college workload with parenthood are disproportionately more likely to be low-income, first-generation college students, and/or underrepresented students (i.e. African American, American Indian, and Hispanic/Latino) (IWPR #C404, 2013). Moreover, of these 4.8 million college students a disproportionate number are women: "women make up 71 percent of all student parents, and roughly 2 million students, or 43 percent of the total student parent population, are single mothers" (IWPR #C424, 2014).

Unfortunately, parenting students' presence is often unnoted–very few institutions identify parenting students as a unique population–and thus they frequently remain an underserved community (IWPR #C404, 2013; Petit, 2014; Van Rhijn & Lero, 2014). Researchers at the IWPR concluded that universities and university communities must address the needs of parenting students to best improve the higher education experience for low-income adults (IWPR #C404, 2013). Likewise, Van Rhijn and Lero (2014) argue that universities must understand parenting students' unique obligations and needs as both parents and students (p. 553).

Similarly, Demeules and Hamer (2013) argue that because there are more college students with children and because that college education is necessary for most work opportunities, colleges must find cost-effective ways to serve and retain this group of students (p. 25). Likewise, Schumacher (2013) writes "it is important that college campuses are prepared to recognize and support student-parents on their path to educational success" and suggests "many postsecondary leaders are looking for promising strategies that match the needs and resources of their institutions and students" (p. 1). Previous research shows that it is important to use existing structures, such as libraries, to help parenting students succeed as both students and parents (Schumacher, 2013, p. 4). An academic library is extremely well placed to be one of these postsecondary leaders, to use existing structures to provide significant support that matches library resources with parenting students' needs.

Moreover, being a parenting student directly affects university attrition rates. A briefing paper for the IWPR shows that parenting students are more likely to leave college without earning a degree, with 53% of parents compared to. 31% of nonparents having left college after six years without a degree (IWPR #C404, 2013). Attrition rates are even worse for low-income parenting students: they are 25% less likely to earn a degree than low-income students without children (IWPR #C404, 2013). Van Rhijn and Lero (2014) suggest "it is likely that student parents who feel unable to handle the demands in their lives or are getting feedback from important others that they are not meeting

their role-related expectation ultimately choose to reduce their demands" (p. 552). When academic libraries either actually are, or are perceived as being, unwelcoming to parenting students, they are contributing to this negative feedback that parenting students are particularly sensitive to, and which leads to higher attrition rates among parenting students.[1]

Parenting students face many challenges. Brown and Nichols (2012) found that parenting students face additional barriers to completing their program of study and Barnes (2016) suggests that childcare is one of these major barriers. The IWPR found that more than 40% of parenting students work full time and more than 50% have 30 hours of care-giving responsibilities per week (IWPR #C404, 2013). This, clearly, limits the amount of time parenting students can focus solely on their studies. Parenting students' needs range from need for financial aid, affordable housing, flexible schedules, and mentoring and health services; however, the most frequently cited, and often overwhelming, challenge is child care. Child care is undeniably a critical resource for parenting students' ability to pursue and complete post-secondary education. Miller, Gault, and Thorman (2011) found that more than 80% of surveyed parenting students said child care availability was very important to their decision to attend college, with 46% saying on-campus child care was the most important factor (p. 14, emphasis added). Likewise, another survey found 42% of single parenting students said that their parenting responsibilities would make it likely or very likely that they would have to stop attending college (Miller, et al., cited in Schumacher, 2013, p. 3). While most of these difficulties fall outside the purview of what an academic library can reasonably offer, the library can, in fact, offer support to parenting students in a variety of ways, namely by creating or encouraging a family-friendly space in which parenting students feel welcome and supported to complete their schoolwork.

"Retaining Young Student Parents: a Growing Challenge" (2013) gives the example of a student, Mai, and her need for child care during both class time as well as studying and work time (p. 23–24). Miller et al. (2011) reached similar conclusions: "student parents' need for child care goes beyond their time in school related activities. … Many student parents need care after hours and on weekends" (p. 22). However, finding reliable and affordable child care at all hours is a nearly impossible task for most parenting students. Therefore, the realistic alternative for many parenting students is that because they frequently need care for their children, they have their children with them as they complete various aspects of their studies. Indeed, if child care hours are limited, either by time, money or availability, it is logical that parents would spend those valuable hours in class, where children are generally not welcome, and not on the hours where they are studying, composing papers, or completing group assignments – all activities that are frequently completed in the academic library.

Research shows that by even taking small steps to help support parenting students, universities can directly positively impact student retention. One such example is the *Steps to Success* pilot program at St. Catherine University. After three years, the program showed that regular support with on- and off-campus resources that brought stability to at-risk parenting students' lives was effective in retaining them in higher education (Demeules & Hamer, 2013, p. 24–25). Van Rhijn and Lero's (2014) three-year study of nearly 400 students with one or more dependent children under the age of 18 (the "Mature Student Experience Survey") suggests that perceived ability to balance school and family responsibilities is directly connected to student satisfaction, and

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[1] Author's note: My article was entirely researched and written in the Spring of 2016. In the time my article was out for review, the following relevant article was published: Godfrey et al. (2017). Supporting Student Retention and Success: Including Family Areas in an Academic Library. *Portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 1(2), 375–388. Accessed May 2017. While it is gratifying to see others addressing the topic, Godfrey, et al.'s article in no way contributed to my own research. I am including it in the literature review at the suggestion of one of my article's peer-reviewers.