Colleges aren't very kid-friendly [1]

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EXCERPTS

Amber Angel decided to enroll in college soon after her daughter Lennon, now 7, was born. “I wanted to make something of myself, so that I could provide for her better.” Angel was 21 at the time, working part-time at the Gap.

Angel drove past Los Angeles Valley College (LAVC), a local community college, and noticed a swing set on the edge of the campus. “I really just stumbled on it, and I knew this was how I could go to school, to have my daughter there with me,” said Angel, who is now 28 and working as a mentor to other student parents at LAVC.

When student parents have access to childcare on campus, there is evidence that they are more likely to stay in school and to graduate. This is particularly important for colleges to take into account considering roughly a quarter of all undergraduates—including 30 percent of those in community college—have children. Yet undergraduates rarely have access to childcare.

Soon after spotting the playground on campus, Angel registered for classes and headed to the child-development center to enroll her daughter in daycare. Unfortunately, the waiting list was six to 12 months long, which is typical at campus childcare centers nationwide, according to Barbara Gault, the vice president and executive director of the Institute for Women’s Policy Research (IWPR). Using data from the National Coalition of Campus Children’s Centers, Gault estimates that campus childcare meets only about five percent of existing need.

What’s more, a recent IWPR report, “Child Care for Parents in College: A State-by-State Assessment,” shows that availability of campus childcare actually declined over the last decade at community and public four-year colleges in 36 states. The IWPR also found that 95 percent of childcare centers at two- and four-year colleges maintained an average waiting list of 82 children.

California, where Angel lives, tied with New York for the highest rate of colleges offering at least some childcare. But these rates do not take into account waiting lists and ability of childcare centers to meet students’ needs. “Many colleges don’t see childcare as an important part of the array of services they provide to students,” Gault said. “Colleges simply aren’t aware of the need and often students aren’t that vocal or don’t even think to ask for it.”

Angel did ask for on-campus childcare, repeatedly. In fact, she stopped by the child-development center every day to see if there was any movement on the waitlist. “I was a squeaky wheel and I just wouldn’t take ‘no’ for an answer,” Angel said. Her persistence paid off: Right before the start of classes, the director called to say a spot had opened up. The center operates using a sliding scale for income, and because Angel’s income was so low while she was a student, she was not required to contribute.

Other low-income students use state subsidies and childcare vouchers to pay for on- and off-campus daycare. Brittney Ferara utilized the State of Washington’s Department of Social and Health Services Child Care Subsidy Program to send her daughter, Zora, now 9, to daycare while she attended Seattle Central College from 2008 until 2011, first earning an associate’s degree in social and human services and then credit toward a bachelor’s degree.

While attending school, Ferara also worked full-time. Friends cared for her daughter during gaps between work and school. This situation is common, according to IWPR’s Gault. “Our impression is that the majority of students today are relying on childcare from family and friends because they have to. And this can be difficult because arrangements are often unstable and can change without notice.” Students without family living locally may also struggle to get the help they need.

College presents unique childcare challenges because classes may be offered during the evening or on alternating days of the week, and schedules change every semester, making it difficult to negotiate a set routine with a sitter or daycare center. Yet the majority of colleges do very little to help student parents meet their childcare needs. For example, while I was a single parent in graduate school, my parents shuttled my daughter to and from preschool and playdates during gaps in their own work schedules. I even considered studying in the locker room of the gym I belonged to because they offered babysitting for up to three hours while members worked out. What does it say about the country’s priorities that it’s easier to find drop-in childcare while you take Zumba than English 101?

Like me, Ferara recalled having to "get creative" with childcare when classes required for her major were only offered in the evening. "I had a lot of great friends who had my back, and I would figure out how to meet the minimum attendance requirements in each class to get that grade," she said.

Patching together a network of informal care and relying on state subsidies, Ferara found navigating the bureaucracy of social-service agencies to be incredibly draining. "The system for obtaining benefits and childcare was so frustrating. It would've been really refreshing to be able to just go to school and focus on that," Ferara said. "Especially when you are on TANF [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families], they are just saying that you should drop out of school and go to work as soon as possible."

Each state has different education and work requirements to be eligible for public benefits like childcare subsidies, according to the IWPR report. Some states impose specifications on how long recipients must participate in education or training, while others limit the types of degrees low-income students can pursue while receiving benefits. The IWPR found the most demanding work requirements in Washington, Arizona, and Kentucky, where childcare subsidy recipients who are enrolled in school must combine educational hours with 20 or more hours of work per week. When asked what states could do to promote college success among low-income student parents, Gault suggested that states remove these rules and restrictions for college students who need childcare subsidies.

After several years juggling work and school, relying on childcare by friends and in daycare centers, Ferara still managed to get a near-4.0 GPA and a bachelor's degree in human services from Evergreen State College in Washington in 2013.

As I've reported for The Atlantic in the past, studies show bachelor's degree recipients earn an average of 65 percent more than high-school graduates over the course of their lives. Higher education also reduces reliance on public benefits. A study of 158 single-mother college students in New York found that 100 percent of the former welfare recipients who earned four-year degrees and 81 percent of those who earned associate degrees stopped relying on public benefits programs.

Even after dropping out of school in the eighth grade and becoming a teen mom at the age of 17, Ferara managed to break the cycle of poverty by obtaining a college degree. "Without school, I probably would have stayed working as a barista, gone back to selling pot, not being able to support my daughter. I've been poor my entire life. My family legacy is homelessness, criminal activity, drugs, and gang banging, and I just didn't want that for my daughter," Ferara said.

All of the student parents I interviewed for this article cited their children as their primary motivation to go back to school. Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas also uncovered the motivating influence of kids in interviews of single mothers in Philadelphia and Camden, New Jersey, featured in their book, Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage.

It's not just low-income mothers who recognize their children played a key role in their education. In a recent New York Times profile, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg was quoted as saying, "My success in law school, I have no doubt, was in large measure because of baby Jane … Each part of my life provided respite from the other and gave me a sense of proportion that classmates trained only on law studies lacked."

When Angel and her daughter started school at LAVC together, Lennon was 2-and-a-half: Amber enrolled in child-development classes and Lennon in preschool. Because LAVC, like many colleges, uses the on-campus childcare center as a laboratory for their child-development department, Angel could apply what she was learning in the classroom. "I ate lunch with my daughter, volunteered in the classroom, and I learned so much from seeing her interactions with the teachers," Angel said. Schools often vary in the kinds of internships they offer to early-childhood-education students; some offer placements in their own childcare centers on campus, some require students to venture out into the community, and some do a combination of both.

When Angel graduated from LAVC with her associate's degree in child development, her daughter graduated from preschool at the same time. "It was really special, and it wasn't supposed to happen at the same time, so when it did … I will never forget."

Determined to pursue a bachelor's degree, Angel enrolled at California State University, Northridge in 2014, where she is now a senior majoring in family studies.

Like many student parents, Angel found the four-year state university to be less kid-friendly than community college. "It's a lot of 18-year-olds fresh out of high school or commuters. There's less of a student parent presence on campus," Angel said. She described being turned away after asking if her daughters could wait outside of a yoga class in the fitness center on campus. "They looked at me like I was crazy," she said. Student parents are more likely to attend community colleges because they tend to cost less, offer more evening and part-time courses, and are more likely to offer targeted resources for parents.

According to Marni Roosevelt, a faculty member in the LAVC child-development department and the director of the campus's family resource center, many parents are not able to utilize the services regularly offered to students because "they are in a rush leaving class to pick up their kids and then rushing on and off campus for a night class because their mother or someone is watching the kids." The Family Resource Center at LAVC offers student parents a place to congregate and even study while keeping an eye on their children. It also has a kid-friendly computer lounge, a full kitchen and lactation room, a parenting library, and a baby-clothes exchange.

While the Family Resource Center at LAVC is entirely grant-funded, other financial models exist to support student parents on campuses across the country. The University of Michigan, for instance, offers childcare subsidies to income-qualified student parents that are funded by a $1 fee paid by all students and by the university's general fund. A recent Urban Institute report highlighted 17 programs, including the one at the University of Michigan, that are taking varied approaches to meet students' childcare needs. Some offer on-campus services while others focus on referring students to off-campus resources.

“There [is] a constellation of programs on the workforce side and a complex array of programs on the childcare side, so it can be complicated for schools, states, providers, and localities to bring everything together to meet the needs of this student population,” said Gina Adams, a senior fellow at the Urban Institute and a co-author of the report.

While four-year colleges seldom offer childcare to students who live on campus, some institutions are pushing to change the status quo. At Endicott College in Beverly, Massachusetts, for example, toddlers are a visible part of campus life. Endicott’s residential program for single mothers called Keys to Degrees, was also featured in the Urban Institute report.

“It’s surprising when you first see them [kids] in the dorm, and I had to explain the program to my parents, but you get used to it,” said Meredith Bemus, a junior who lived in the dorm that houses student parents and their kids during her first two years at Endicott. Because Keys to Degrees only serves about 10 students at a time, Bemus didn’t see kids that often, but she did become friends with and occasionally babysat for one mom in the program. “It really opens your eyes to the demands of being a student while you are raising a kid, and I think for the most part, people here see the program as a positive.”

Still, tensions arise. According to Bemus, on one occasion, a mom in the Keys program found her car covered with condoms. But this kind of incident is rare, Bemus said. “I’m glad my school cares about making sure everybody has the opportunity to be a student.”

Sarah Schuyler, a junior at Endicott and a member of the Keys program, reported overwhelming support for her son, Asher, now 3, on campus. Schuyler took six credits at a community college in Pennsylvania while living at home before applying to Endicott’s residential program. She moved onto campus in 2014 when her son was 15 months old. “It’s been really amazing watching him grow up here,” Schuyler said. “When I walk around with Asher, people all over campus will be calling out to him or giving him a high five.”

“We want the students in our program to feel supported and to have the complete college experience,” said Autumn Green, Ph.D., who oversees the Keys to Degrees program at Endicott and is working to replicate it on campuses across the country.

Schuyler’s son, Asher, attends a local Montessori preschool until 3 p.m. on weekdays using a Massachusetts childcare voucher, which program staff helped her to apply for.* Schuyler also uses free babysitting by work-study students to attend school events. She lists chorus, musical theater, and the campus magazine as her favorite extracurriculars.

For mom and son, the best thing about the Keys to Degrees program is the community. “We all become very close, because of our unique situation, and our kids do too. We just had trivia night and our team name was MILF for motivated, intelligent, loving families,” Schuyler said.

Focusing on the needs of student families requires effort and money, resources which may already be strained at colleges facing dwindling enrollment. But the payoff for figuring out strategies to meet the complex needs of student parents might prove to be an asset in the increasingly competitive college marketplace.

“In the private sector, we see employers starting to look at the whole person and work-life needs as essential to employee success, but colleges and universities have not generally been thinking about their student body in this way,” said IWPR’s Gault. “We are a little slow to respond to the idea that nontraditional students are the new norm.” In fact, some studies show less than 20 percent of college students today fit the “traditional,” direct-from-high school model.

“I think things are slowly changing, and we are seeing more support for student parents. The money is really not there yet, but the success stories are clear,” said LAVC’s Roosevelt. Ferara is proud to be one such story. She now works full-time as a program manager at a homeless shelter. “My salary is about to go up to $58,000, but it’s like I still sometimes forget. I’m just not used to it: being middle class.”

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