

In academia, a caste system for parents: Grad students, lower-paid workers say colleges fail test on rising child care costs ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Boston University is spending \$10 million to upgrade its child care center, moving and expanding operations to a freshly renovated historic home that will offer staffing levels well above state requirements.

With three times the capacity of the current facility, a high-level child care center right near campus in Brookline's leafy Cottage Farm neighborhood should be a powerful perk for BU employees. But the eye-popping tuition for the new facility — \$2,500 a month for infants and \$2,250 for toddlers — has created a firestorm on campus.

"We realize that these rates make child care inaccessible to many graduate students and postdoctoral researchers," BU president Robert Brown acknowledged in a recent letter to his leadership team. The university, he added, is working to offer those employees financial assistance, but he warned those amounts would be limited.

And it is not only grad students and postdocs who are reeling. Some mid-level BU managers and supervisors said they, too, will not be able to afford the renovated center when it opens in the spring of 2020.

The child care crunch in academia is not unique to BU. Costs are so hefty at many schools that it has created a kind of day care caste system in academia. Lower-paid employees and grad students at many local colleges, eking out a living on stipends and grants, can't begin to afford day care at some of the Boston area's top universities, where the monthly cost of caring for an infant can exceed \$3,000.

It's a pressing issue at Harvard University, where the school's 4,500-member Graduate Student Union has set a Tuesday strike deadline if a contract is not settled. Among the sticking points is child care assistance; the union estimates that at least 400 grad students are not currently eligible for such aid but dearly need it. Harvard has proposed some financial assistance for grad students, but it is significantly below what it provides higher-paid full-time faculty.

"People shouldn't have to choose between pursuing a graduate education and having a family," said Rachel Sandalow-Ash, a law student and union bargaining committee member who earns \$12 an hour — the minimum wage in Massachusetts — as a research assistant.

The most common form of employee assistance for child care is dependent care accounts that allow workers to set aside pre-tax income to pay for services, according to the Society for Human Resource Management. Much rarer within the corporate world is outright financial assistance, although some universities over the years have offered help. That aid is particularly crucial for graduate and postdoc parents, who have the twin challenge of relatively low-paying jobs and hefty tuition.

BU offers no financial assistance for child care to students or employees, but the cost at its current center, \$1,375 a month for all children, is considered a bargain compared to what the new center will charge. At Harvard's campus-based centers, infant care costs \$3,150 a month and it's \$2,500 for older toddlers. Harvard offers several assistance programs, but aid and priority for slots favor those with higher incomes.

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, meanwhile, is in the middle: Infant care costs \$2,829 and toddler care is \$2,371. Financial assistance for child care is considered more egalitarian than at Harvard, but prices become prohibitive for postdocs with more than one child — and grad students do not receive any aid.

The tens of thousands of grad students and postdocs at local schools are part of the brain factory that has powered the region's economy and drawn employers from around the world to the Boston area. But the high price of child care for these up-and-comers threatens that economic supply line.

Carleigh Beriont, a 30-year-old Harvard grad student, makes \$2,800 a month teaching and grading papers. But it cost her and her husband, a middle school teacher, \$2,000 a month for child care for her daughter — and that's in Newburyport, where they live.

Beriont is not eligible for any child care financial assistance through Harvard.

"For people like me, who are coming from backgrounds without unlimited access to wealth, they make you choose — am I going to be a parent or am I going to finish my PhD," she said. "I am trying to do both."

Meanwhile, the most that Harvard offers postdoc students and lower-paid staffers averages out to \$7,500 a year for those who make less than \$55,000 in adjusted gross family income. Those with higher incomes get less aid.

Faculty, by contrast, can get as much as \$24,000 a school year in child care help.

One benefit of the Harvard aid is that the university does not restrict parents who receive it, as some schools do, to the six child care centers on campus.

"This lets families who receive the funds use them where they choose, whether that is a [campus] center or a family child care center or a nanny," the university said in a statement.

Still, the disparity in Harvard's financial assistance is striking.

Ann Bookman, former director of the Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy at UMass Boston, said there is a dire need for colleges and universities to provide more child care options and assistance, especially for those lowest-paid workers, typically grad students and postdocs who are juggling work, school, and children.

Grad students and postdocs, many making less than \$35,000 annually, are often lower on the pay scale than clerical and other office workers at universities. At Harvard, nonfaculty staff make about \$65,000 on average and are entitled to the same levels of child care financial assistance as postdocs.

"The number of campus-based child care centers is declining at the same time the number of college students who are parents is increasing," Bookman said. "Studies show that when students get help with child care, their rates of completion are three times greater than college students who are parents who don't have child care help."

Campus-based child care centers closed in the past two years at Salem State University and the University of Massachusetts Boston. Both schools reported financial losses operating the centers, especially UMass, which charged significantly less than many other free-standing centers in the city.

At BU, prices are considered affordable for now. But once it moves next year to its renovated location, the new prices kick in. Families who have children at the old site, which is closing, will be grandfathered with a small price increase at the new center, but only for one year.

Christina Rice, director of the graduate tax program in BU's law school, is worried. She has a 3-year-old daughter at the current center, and is due with her second child Christmas Eve. She will be charged the full monthly price of \$2,500 for him.

That means Rice and her husband will face a monthly child care bill of nearly \$4,000 — and that's with the temporary price for their eldest. BU does not offer financial assistance for child care.

As a staffer, Rice is paid more modestly than faculty. She said she and her husband, a public high school teacher, won't be able to afford having their son at the center, too.

"BU has now priced out half the population who would use this," she said.

A BU spokesman defended the new prices, noting that they are less than what Harvard and MIT charge for their on-campus centers. He said BU set its new rates after conducting an extensive survey of the Boston market, and that BU would not be making money off the expanded venture.

"Our resources are limited," the spokesman, Colin Riley, said in a statement. "We are very sensitive to the financial needs of BU parents who require day care services, but we have to consider their request for additional subsidies in the broader context of the rest of the BU student, faculty, and staff community and the kinds of urgent needs they have, too."

At MIT, parents say they, too, are struggling with costs, though the school offers one of the more generous financial assistance programs, which is open to staffers and postdocs. Families making less than \$150,000 a year can receive enough aid to lower their costs to about 20 percent of their income for one child in care. Lower-income families pay a smaller share.

However employees and postdocs with multiple children in child care can end up paying more than 40 percent of their income to the MIT centers.

"If the cost of child care was not so high, I would be ready to have another child now, but it's out of reach for us," said Michele LeRoux, a 35-year-old microbiologist and postdoc who is also paying off student loans.

She and her husband, a mental health counselor, live in a cramped apartment in Watertown and receive assistance from MIT for their 2-year-old son's child care. LeRoux has seen many colleagues who wanted to have a second child leave school and take much-higher-paying industry jobs.

Realizing that most universities were unlikely to offer more aid to struggling parents, LeRoux started a petition to the National Institutes of Health, which funds many postdocs' research. It urges the federal agency to allow graduate students and postdocs to use some of their federal awards on child care.

Already, more than 1,700 students from Massachusetts to California have signed the petition.

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