

N.B. universities unaccommodating for students with children ^[1]

Commentary: Student parents struggle to find housing, balancing work and childcare

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Source: NB Media Co-op

Format: Article

Publication Date: 28 Aug 2022

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

Higher education is by no means an easy endeavour. To be successful, one must excel in coursework, keep to a regime of study, and as required, complete assignments and research projects on a chosen topic. It's hard for everyone. It's especially hard for student parents.

Student parents are primary caregivers to their biological or adopted children who are pursuing post-secondary education. Student parents include males, females, and LGBTQ+ people. For students traveling with children from other provinces or countries to pursue higher education, life could not be tougher and more challenging, when compared to students without children. That is why it is surprising how non-inclusive and most times unaccommodating universities in New Brunswick are towards students with children who are juggling their studies alongside caring for their children.

In my interaction with domestic and international student parents in New Brunswick, the majority identified first as parents. Their children come first. This is evident in their canceling of classes or requesting permission to join classes online, on days when unforeseeable events obligate them to cater to their children's needs.

While everyone experiences difficulties in completing their degrees, those who are also primary caregivers for their children face unique challenges, which are particular to their situation. This is more so if they have children below the age of six. In New Brunswick, children begin elementary school between the ages of five and six. Prior to this, they either remain at home or if their parents have the necessary financial resources and social networks, they might attend childcare. As a result, and because foreign and out-of-province students frequently lack either the financial resources or local networks, students with children grapple with how to care for their children while they go to school to learn and also work.

To gain a deeper grasp of the challenges and experiences of students caring for their children, I talked to a number of students to get first-hand information on their struggles. Most responses resonated with my own experience as a student parent.

In our conversations, students' parents, again and again, expressed two worries. First, they face difficulties finding accommodations, as a student with children. Second, they must find accessible daycare.

Readers of the NB Media Co-op will be familiar with New Brunswick's housing crisis. For parents who are studying, housing is a real difficulty. Students with children I spoke with, especially people who did not live in Fredericton, said that having children puts them at a big disadvantage in the scramble for limited, expensive, and hard-to-get accommodation.

In fact, some rental and housing companies flat out claim to have a no-children preference for prospective tenants, which sounds immoral, at best, and perhaps discriminatory at worst.

Some companies restrict the options for students with children to basement apartments. However, not everyone wants to live in the basement, especially if they have to pay separately for electricity in winter. Students find this costly because the basement is usually colder in winter. Some people I spoke with explained how rental companies told them that the only room available was the basement because of the children. While some people said other tenants reported their children as making noise and causing disturbances.

People I spoke with explained how some rental companies were responsive and willing to rent an apartment, until hearing about the children. Then, a few hours later, the companies sent them messages saying that they preferred students without children, and in some cases, they never replied to the students' messages afterward.

Finding housing is particularly difficult at the beginning of fall term when students arrive from other parts of New Brunswick, the Maritimes, the rest of Canada, and other countries. The challenge of finding housing is compounded by a lack of accessible daycare for students.

The inability to adequately access daycare makes life much harder for parents trying to study. For some, the challenges are almost impossible to surmount, without family or other social support from their community.

Students also told me about their difficulties in accessing the daycare services that are available. For some, cost remains prohibitive,

especially for students who self-sponsor their education. It can be a struggle to meet tuition, housing, food, and other costs while studying full time.

Despite the 50 per cent discount recently implemented as part of the Canada-New Brunswick Early Learning and Childcare Bilateral Agreement 2021-22, the cost of daycare can still be beyond the reach of students who have no other source of support.

Student parents with children under six are ineligible for elementary school enrolment.

Indeed, students from other cities and provinces and international students who must arrive just before term starts, often struggle to get their kids enrolled in school. With the absence of after-school programs for their children, they struggle with caregiving after school hours.

Often, they end up having to juggle care for their children, attending to academic demands, with engaging in subsistence part-time work.

This problem is compounded by the fact that there is no drop-in, short-term, flexible daycare available on campus to support parents. What is a student to do who can't afford full-time childcare, and yet needs support for a couple of hours a couple of times a week? One parent admitted to leaving her child in the school lobby after 3:15 pm because she could not skip classes. The child's school insisted she looked for an alternative to care for her child after the close of school.

One of the benefits of the shift to virtual teaching with COVID-19 was that it allowed students with children some flexibility. So, perhaps the return to the classroom demands other, flexible child-care options that this article suggests universities explore.

Options that simply don't exist for parents who are trying to also study.

In my own case, coming from Japan last year, I had to juggle childcare with my studies, while waiting for my spouse to be able to join me. My daughter and I arrived long before my partner, which meant I had great difficulty juggling my studies and childcare. This mirrors the experience of many foreign students from Africa, who in most cases have to come with their children leaving their spouses (primary sponsor) behind to rejoin them later.

It was stressful, and there were few resources to support me.

I'm lucky. I managed to make pursuing my graduate degree work.

But what about other students with a very tight academic schedule?

How does the struggle with childcare impact the academic performance of parents who are students, especially in their first years of study as they're trying to transition to university life?

When overwhelmed, who can they seek support from? Some professors are supportive of parents who must put their kids first. Others are less so. As some student parents struggle to complete assignments by the deadline, they must often ask for extensions. Some professors accommodate, but many do not.

Some people have social support networks to help provide care for their kids, while they study (and work). But this social support often comes with extra burdens on the helper, as helpers must readjust their own schedules to provide help.

I suspect most parents who are students, whether they are domestic or from other countries, face similar experiences.

All of this raises critical questions: is taking care of children while studying a reason for housing discrimination? It seems it should be as illegal as other forms of discrimination. Are students who are parents, particularly women pursuing higher learning, undeserving of special, flexible support with childcare from the schools they are enrolled in? After all, a student is not an employee, and an educational institution has special obligations to ensure that all of its students can succeed, not merely those who don't have children.

On the bright side, these challenges could easily be addressed through deliberate policy responses.

On the one hand, the dearth of public housing contributes significantly to the housing shortage in major cities in New Brunswick. Therefore, rent caps, investing in low-cost public housing, and enforcing non-discriminatory human rights policies for low-income earners, particularly students with children, would be the first step. Universities and colleges could make new investments (and increase their investments) in family hostels to cater to students with children and their spouses for at least the first six months of their studies.

For instance, in Japan, where I completed my MA, universities maintain dormitories for single and parenting students/families, particularly international graduate students. At the University of New Brunswick, I wasn't even accepted into my program of study before the small number of available family residences was filled.

In Japan, before their arrival, all new graduate students were entitled to apartments suitable to their situation. The rent was subsidized, and students, their spouses, and their children were able to live in the residence for a minimum of six months, after their arrival. This ensures that families can stay together from the beginning and that spouses can be there to provide support with care for the children. Coming to Fredericton last year, I spent my first eight weeks in the city struggling to find housing. I wasn't alone, as now-incoming international students will tell you. To put it simply, the university is not doing enough in the area of housing.

Regarding access to affordable and flexible daycare, recognizing students with children as having a peculiar challenge, and making special allocations for them in daycare centers, would be a start.

It's probably impossible for incoming graduate students with children to get a daycare spot. This is because they don't get accepted into their program until mere months before the studies start, while the daycare spots near campus often have a long waiting list.

Perhaps it requires further investment by the university and the province in creating flexible, drop-in daycare services for students. Such daycare services would address the needs of parenting students in the first year of their studies. This would help to fill the gap created by the absence of a spouse or care-providing social networks.

With less worry about accommodation and daycare, students with children could focus on their studies, and they'd likely see improved grades and success rates.

Region: New Brunswick ^[3]

Tags: child care ^[4]

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