**Students Can Be Parents, Too**

By Perry Threlfall April 16, 2017

The first day of college is memorable. Students plan new outfits and matching backpacks and worry if their shoes will be comfortable walking across campus. The day I showed up at orientation for my first semester at a big university, I felt pretty good in my spirit sweatshirt and the jeans my 14-year-old daughter picked out ("mom jeans" were out of the question). While new students and their corresponding adults moved into a big auditorium for the Q&A forum, the leader — a 20ish undergrad wearing khakis and a golf shirt — pointed to me and asked, "Where is your student?" My face went hot as I replied, "I am the student," and then what seemed like a hundred heads turned to see the student who looked like a parent. I wanted to be invisible.

The ideal college student is imagined by professors and administrators as an 18- to 22-year-old unfettered by responsibilities that fall outside his or her chief role as student. Perhaps the most revealing documents to communicate this are the course syllabi. Course rules, requirements, and expectations rarely account for the external demands that some students have. For me, a single mother in college, the syllabi erased my identity in small, seemingly insignificant ways, which the professors were surely not aware of: group projects with randomly assigned students who most likely didn’t have children to consider, classroom rules that prohibited cellphones, and unforeseen costs all had larger implications on my ability to succeed than they did on that of my classmates. Invisibility no longer seemed appealing.

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As more students with young children enroll, colleges find ways to help them succeed.

The U.S. Department of Education predicts that women’s enrollment in college will rise 15 percent by 2024. My own analysis of data drawn from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study indicates that much of that growth will very likely be driven by mothers, many of them unmarried, enrolling for the first time. This growth portends the need to reverse the culture of invisibility experienced by women like me — which is why, for my research, I interviewed single-mother students to learn about their experiences and what, if anything, could be changed to ensure their graduation.

Their stories were as diverse as the women themselves, but they conveyed a belief that a college degree would add value to the lives of their children through increased financial security and social status. They saw education as a vehicle to combat the stereotype of single motherhood, and as a way to fulfill the role of a good mother. But they also felt that trying to be a good mother by putting their children’s needs first could be a barrier to graduating.

There are several ways that professors, often with simple syllabus changes, can reduce the invisibility of single-mother students and help them stay in school. Drawing on stories of the women in my study, I present a list of five things that many single mothers would want to say to their professors:

**1. Acknowledge I exist.** I am making enormous efforts and sacrifices to be in your course. If I am running late or miss a homework deadline because my child was ill or needed to have a green bean extracted from his ear, I’ll find a way to make it up to you. Please put in writing that you will make provisions for this possibility by stating explicitly that students with family responsibilities should contact you by email regarding missed or late work.

**2. Rethink your phone rules.** When you make a rule that cellphones must be turned off in class, consider that I need to be available if my child is running a fever or gets trampled by a herd of elephants while I am listening to your lecture, and that this would take precedence over your wisdom. I’ll put it on vibrate, but it’s got to stay on.

**3. Help me network with others like me.** When assigning group projects, devise a way for students with children to work together. If I have to meet with these strangers outside of the classroom, I will be much more engaged and able to learn if they are willing to put research together at the park instead of the library.

**4. Consider that I’m financially strapped.** I understand we need to have books in order to learn, but please don’t force me to make a choice between a birthday gift for my daughter and an expensive supplemental style guide. She will win. Every time. I’ll borrow the guide from another student or find it in the library if I can.

**5. Find out who I am and why I’m in college.** I know you have hundreds of students and it’s impossible to connect personally with each and every one of us, but if I try to share my story with you, take time to listen. It’s hard for me to tell you I’m a single mom, because I’m afraid you will think I am less committed to my studies. I’m not — most of us are more committed than other students are. The women who have gone before me are more likely to have persisted if they had personal connections with their professors, and your recognition of me as a student facing major obstacles to be in your classroom means that I will very likely stay around longer — and eventually graduate.

*Perry Threlfall teaches sociology at George Mason University and Virginia Commonwealth University.*

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