

The Impact of Counselor Education Training on Student-Parents

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When pursuing education, students experience a variety of stressors that can be exacerbated by external pressures. For students who are also parents, the responsibilities inherent in student and parent roles can lead to increased stress and attrition. Improving enrollment and retention of parents enhances student, and ultimately clinical, diversity. This article explores research on the student-parent experience. Suggestions are made for how counselors, faculty members, departments, and universities can contribute to the success of student-parents.

Keywords: Counselors-in-training, student-parents, retention, diversity

Students and higher education are consistently evolving. Degree programs are shifting to meet a variety of student needs (Kirby, Biever, Martinez, & Gomez, 2004) and students who identify as “non-traditional” can now be considered the new typical (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2002). Here, we consider two common conditions of the non-traditional student: (a) delaying college enrollment and once enrolled, (b) caring for dependents, most typically children (NCES, 2002). The stress of balancing student and parent roles at the beginning of a degree program predisposes students to attrition (Daugherty & Lane, 1999). Although we don’t typically conceptualize privilege in terms of parental status, there is inherent power in juggling fewer roles as a student. Successful negotiations of parent and student roles is a concern to universities and counselor educators alike; difficulties aligning parental and student status can lead to attrition, challenges with enrollment, and decreased graduation rates (Springer, Parker, & Leviten-Reid, 2009). Springer et al. (2009), found that graduate student-parents are less likely to finish their degree when compared with non-parent graduate students. Quimby and O’Brien (2006) noted the fastest growing population in higher education are female students over the age of 25 and suggested that female students over the age of 25 are frequently balancing their student role with parenting. These statistics are especially true when examining enrollment in counselor education; currently, women’s enrollment outnumbers men’s at a rate of nearly two to one

(Michel, Hall, Hays, & Runyan, 2013). Discouragingly, one of the many reasons women end up leaving academic settings is due to the tension caused as a result of balancing responsibilities with family life (Frasch, Mason, Stacy, Goulden, & Hoffman, 2007). If higher education continues to privilege traditional student roles by recruiting and retaining a homogenous group, it is likely that the diversity of our student community will be diluted and the counselors we prepare for the workforce will be less diverse. Higher education, and counselor education specifically, is challenged with recruiting and retaining more diverse students so the professional community is enhanced by various perspectives and backgrounds (Michel et al., 2013).

The Student-Parent Experience

It is necessary for counselor educators to understand student experiences and perceptions of the larger higher education system. Because scholarship on counseling graduate student-parents remains limited, we expanded our review to include research about diverse student groups from post-secondary and graduate programs. Even with this expansion, research examining the experiences of student-parents is sparse. Upon the authors’ review of the most current literature, topics of work-life balance, self and relational awareness, stressors, and relationship enrichment for student-parents follows.

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Work Life Balance

Work-life balance is described as a lack of conflict or friction between work and family roles and responsibilities (Chen & Slan-Jerusalim, 2009). According to Chen and Slan-Jerusalim (2009) work-life balance disruptions usually take one of three forms: time, strain, or behavior. A time-based conflict is the extent to which a particular role, like parenting, competes for a person's time. A strain-based conflict occurs when stressors, such as parenting, interfere with the ability to perform in another role (e.g., student or employee). Finally, behavior-based conflict is present when the behavioral requirements of one role, like extensive travel for work, are incompatible with other roles, such as being a parent (Chen & Slan-Jerusalim, 2009). These types of disruptions are commonly experienced by student-parents and can contribute to attrition.

Negotiating disruptions in work-life balance is constant. One cannot avoid disruptions, but individuals can strengthen resiliency factors in order to successfully negotiate many roles and demands. High self-efficacy (beliefs about one's ability to accomplish tasks and face challenges as they arise) is a key component when navigating many demands. As it turns out, confidence in one's ability to encounter and solve the disruptions of time, strain, or behavior is a strong predictor of satisfying work-life balance (Chen & Slan-Jerusalim, 2009).

Self and Other Awareness

As graduate students grow in self-awareness, their family relationships can also be changed (Murray & Kleist, 2011). In counselor training, there is a clear expectation that personal growth and self-awareness will contribute to students' overall personal-wellness (Luke & Kiweewa, 2010; CACREP, 2009). Counseling students are asked to explore their value systems and patterns of relating to others, which can result in relationship changes (Furr & Carroll, 2003). These changes, however, can be a predictor of relationship stress as student transformations disrupt homeostasis for the family system (Blume, 1997). Sori, Wetchler, Ray, and Niedner (1996) explained that graduate students who are training in family counseling are often challenged with confronting problems in their own marriage or family of origin. Murray and Kleist (2011) conducted a qualitative study of counseling graduate students and found that their couple relationships transformed as they were exposed to the discovery of new awareness. This awareness resulted in personal and family relationship changes. The relationship changes described were impacted by feelings of supportiveness and gratitude within the couple relationship. Because

this personal growth is so critical to training, we do not argue for limits on personal awareness in our curriculum. Rather, we ask counselor educators to help students to fully acknowledge the impact this growth can have on their family relationships and the stressors that could ensue.

In their study on the impacts of counselor training, Furr and Carroll (2003) asked students to describe the nature and impact of critical incidents that occurred in their graduate training. Findings indicated that critical incidents occurring outside the counseling program were most frequently cited as sources for growth. The authors suggested that many of the incidents described involved personal relationships that were changing as a result of learning that occurred in the counseling graduate program. As graduate students apply what they are learning both in the program and in their personal life, ways of interacting with family members may also begin to change. For example, students may begin to use their basic counseling skills (i.e. reflection of feeling, active listening, restatement of cognitive content, summarizing) when communicating in their personal life. The use of these skills may increase feelings of connectedness and validation in relationships with others (Murray & Kleist, 2011). Preparing students and family members for potential relational change could be beneficial in students' interpersonal relationships and decrease stress in graduate studies.

Stressors

Stress is a common experience for students (Springer et al., 2009). Though student-parent stressors share similarities with those of traditional students, our review of the literature shows that student-parent stressors additionally encompass a negotiation between two distinct systems: the family system and university system. The interplay of these two environments yields a qualitatively different stress across domains of time, energy, money, and support (Gilbert, 1982; Kirby et al., 2004; Lawson & Gaushell, 1991; Sori et al., 1996). Research on the impact of stress in higher education has been conducted with four distinct student populations (a) counseling graduate students, (b) marriage and family therapy graduate students, (c) undergraduate/graduate students engaged in a weekend format of education, and (d) graduate students from a variety of disciplines. The stress related consequences of higher education for student-parents include patterns of triangulation, limited time and energy for partners and families, low levels of family support, financial dependence, and finding job prospects.

Lawson and Gaushell (1991) identified patterns of triangulation among counselors-in-training and their children. When comparing counseling students'

intergenerational family relationships with a nonclinical sample, Lawson and Gaushell (1991) found that counselor trainees have a greater tendency to over-involve their children in their marriage as a means to relieve relationship stress. This difference is indicative of a source of relationship stress for counseling graduate students in particular, and also sheds light on the tendency to triangulate as a response to stress.

Sori et al. (1996) explored the impacts of graduate training on marriage and family therapy student relationships, and found that both students and their spouses agreed that “too little time for our own marriage/family” was the highest ranked stressor (p. 265). The second ranked stressor, also agreed upon by both spouses, was having “too little energy for our own marriage/family” (Sori et al., 1996, p. 265). When bringing focus specifically to students’ relationships with their children, participants expressed feelings of guilt as they struggled to find enough time and energy for their children.

Kirby et al. (2004) surveyed students attending weekend college programs across a variety of disciplines (both graduate and undergraduate) and found further stressors in students’ family lives impacting family, work, and social life. Results indicated that school significantly interfered with family time and events, and single parents had lower levels of family support and cooperation. These results reinforce the stress of having multiple demands on time, and also draw attention to the unique, within group experiences of single parents. Though single parents navigate similar stressors as partnered parents do, their single contexts lay the foundation for unique experiences. In this case, what is unique is lower levels of family support and cooperation. These findings remind us that the transition into student roles impacts far more than the students themselves. Remaining cognizant of student-parents’ family contexts, demands, and supports adds clarity to the student-parent experience.

Stressful impacts of higher education also have the potential to extend beyond graduation, as Gilbert (1982) highlighted when examining the impacts of graduate training on the family. She noted two sources of friction for students’ families: employment prospects and financial dependence. Finding employment after degree completion can be challenging (Gilbert 1982; Wolverson, 2011). When increased difficulty accompanies the job search process, families find the process increasingly stressful, especially when reflecting on the years of sacrifice that often accompany higher education for students’ families (Gilbert, 1982). When the pay-off of employment is further delayed, increased dependence on other financial sources may contribute to family stress and friction as students and their spouses experience a loss of power when

providing for themselves and their children. The stressful impacts of higher education are plentiful for student-parents and extend across factors of time, finances, cooperation, and support. Yet, in spite of these stressors, many student-parents continue to pursue degrees (Kirby et al., 2004).

Enriched Relationships

Though stressful, the impacts of adding a student role to an already active parent role was ultimately enriching for many participants in the research already reviewed (Kirby et al., 2004; Sori et al., 1996). For students enrolled in a weekend format program, Kirby et al. (2004) found that student-parents more frequently cited positive aspects of higher education than the stress of interference with family events. These student-parents found that attending school enriched family life, set a good example for family members (especially children), and improved time management and cooperation skills. Greater family support was a significant predictor of lower stress for these participants, with partnered students reporting higher levels of support and cooperation. In addition, authors reported a surprising finding reflecting a low level of concern for child care problems, with only 1.5% of the entire sample ($n = 566$) reporting it as a concern. After conducting a content analysis of both stressful and enhancing factors, the authors determined that the positive effects of returning to school in a weekend format might mitigate the stress that emerges when students combine family and student roles. More specifically, the weekend format may be more conducive for other members to care for children while the parent returns to school (Kirby et al., 2004; Sori et al., 1996).

More benefits of attending school while negotiating family life appeared in the study conducted with marriage and family therapy students (Sori et al., 1996). In this study, the students reported on the impact training had on their personal relationships and rated the following enriching relationship factors: (a) “awareness of normal life cycle problems,” (b) “accepting own part in marital/family problems,” and (c) “greater awareness of own humanness” (Sori et al., 1996, p. 266). Further, as students progressed through training, they began to identify problems with a perspective that emphasized life-cycle development and mutual causality, while increasing their self-awareness. Participating students and their spouses reported that these shifts in thinking significantly enhanced their family relationships. Though this new worldview is critical to enriching relationships, successful adaptation is first grounded in supportive relationships (Sori et al., 1996).

Recommendations from the Literature

As mentioned previously, a student's perceived lack of ability to balance time between family and school obligations can lead to increased stress and attrition (Smith, Maroney, Nelson, Able & Able, 2006). Several recommendations emerged when considering how to best support student-parents throughout their education. Interventions fostering negotiation, role flexibility, time and task management, and re-evaluation strategies surface as essential (Cron, 2001; Saginak & Saginak, 2005). Recommendations for faculty members, departments, and universities focus on promoting education and awareness among student-parents (Kirby, et.al, 2004; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006). A more detailed look at these supportive and preventative interventions follows, focusing specifically on how counselors, faculty members, departments, and universities can foster support for students as they integrate the roles and responsibilities of student and parent.

Counselor-level

Gilbert (1982) identified graduate school as a time of great stress for students and their families. This time of significant stress is marked by a need for university student personnel intervention. As members of university intervention teams, counselors bring valuable skills that facilitate self-reflection, effective communication, and preventative education. When entering counseling with student-parents, Quimby and O'Brien (2006) suggested avoiding time intensive interventions, so as not to impinge on the already busy lives of student-parents. They further suggest offering childcare and providing meals when facilitating group sessions as additional means that support student-parents seeking counseling services.

Facilitating counseling from a systemic perspective that seeks involvement from student families and support systems is a critical component when working with student-parents (Cron, 2001; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006; Saginak & Saginak, 2005). As parents experience the increased stress that accompanies a return to school, strong self-efficacy, solid social supports, and secure relationship attachments become increasingly relevant (Quimby & O'Brien, 2006). Helping student-parents understand how to access these supportive resources can be crucial to their success in graduate studies. Seminars and workshops provided by counselors are an effective way to inform students about the stress of graduate school and to provide them with unique strategies to cope and respond to this stress (Brannock, Litten, & Smith, 2000). Assessing for risk factors of

insecure attachment, low self-efficacy, and limited social supports remain crucial when working with parents at risk of attrition (Cron, 2001; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006; Saginak & Saginak, 2005).

If such factors as those mentioned above should present themselves, counselors may respond with such interventions as assertiveness training, time balancing techniques, and involvement in interpersonal and parenting support groups (Quimby & O'Brien, 2006). Counselors are encouraged to help students discover and maintain self worth, increase parental confidence, and manage stress while also facilitating systemic interventions. Additional interventions include teaching study skills, test-taking strategies, organizational skills, time management strategies, relaxation techniques, and tactics for managing multiple roles (Quimby & O'Brien, 2006). Counselor educators may respond by providing referral sources for counseling services and incorporating wellness strategies as part of the curriculum.

When working with student-parents and their families, counselors may begin by facilitating family member reflection and evaluation of their current roles and investments in the family system (Cron, 2001; Saginak & Saginak, 2005). Once the current roles, time and emotional investments are identified, the counselor and family can begin to co-construct necessary adaptations the system will make, as one family member begins to integrate the roles and responsibilities of being a student. Furr and Carroll (2003) examined the positive and negative experiences of a counselor training program on student-parents' families. They suggested that the change in personal relationships stems from the learning process associated with being in a counseling program. Therefore, helping students to understand changes experienced in a graduate program is essential to fostering pro-social communication and coping strategies for possible relational changes (Furr & Carroll, 2003). Regularly attending to family roles and responsibilities can provide a healthy work-life balance that greatly improves many other areas of a student-parents life (Chen & Slan-Jersualim, 2009). Maintaining an active balance of labor in the family system via role flexibility and open negotiation of home tasks and child-care is recommended for student-parents (Cron, 2001; Saginak & Saginak, 2005). Throughout negotiation processes, counselors can support and promote clear communication of family member needs, empowering each member as they seek to meet personal, relationship, and household demands (Quimby & O'Brien, 2006). Student-parent resources and support systems, however, extend beyond the responsibilities of university counseling programs. Involvement from faculty members, departments, and university wide structures are necessary when implementing strategies

to retain student-parents in graduate education (Quimby & O'Brien, 2006).

Faculty-level

When it comes to supporting student-parents and their success, faculty mentoring is crucial to student success in the education system (Hazler & Carney, 1993; Furr & Carroll, 2003). Not only can faculty mentor students on the details of parent friendly university policies and navigating the job market while pregnant or parenting (Springer et al., 2009), but they can also offer social support and establish norms that build a sense of community among students (Gilbert, 1982; Hazler & Carney, 1993). Lovitts (2001) contended a strong relationship with an advisor can be the difference between success or failure in graduate study. Also important to note is that student-parents are equally responsible for the success of their relationships with faculty. Williams (2004) advocated for early and explicit communication between faculty and student advisees when it comes to family matters and possible student-parent role conflicts. For example, strain-based conflicts arise when stressors, such as parenting, interfere with roles like being a student (Chen & Slan-Jersalim 2009). The frequency of these conflicts can be lessened when a student-parent is able to balance multiple roles (e.g., parent, worker, student) effectively through open communication with faculty members (Williams, 2004). Faculty and students are encouraged to enter dialogues explicitly stating their needs and expectations in order to actively co-construct supportive and flexible solutions that meet the needs of all involved (Williams, 2004). These dialogues not only create a foundation for successful relationships and a fruitful education, but can also expand faculty awareness of student-parent experiences, common resources, and helpful information to share with future students (Williams, 2004).

Unique experiences for counseling faculty and students emerge when considering the requirements of counselor training. Counselor training programs embrace self-reflection and examination as a critical component of a training curriculum (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2009, Furr & Carroll, 2003.). Students experience intra-personal awareness of their emotions and patterns of behavior while also expanding their inter-personal awareness of relationship patterns (Murray & Kleist, 2011). Because this level of affective learning often surprises students, counselor educators are encouraged to provide supportive orientations to students and their families that prompt students to expect self-examination and unanticipated personal changes as a result of their experiences in the program (Furr & Carroll, 2003). Beyond the prevention efforts

of orientations, counselor educators must strike a difficult balance as they support students in their personal growth while simultaneously avoiding dual relationships (ACA, 2014). As students engage in processes of self-reflection and personal growth, they also experience events of personal significance outside of the program (Murray & Kleist, 2011). Counselor educators are encouraged to approach the impact of these events with sensitivity, and be cautious to not fulfill a counselor role with their students. Counselor educators must engage in the balancing act of attending to students' holistic development while encouraging them to reach out to resources that support their personal development (for example, making counseling referrals) (ACA, 2014). According to Furr and Carroll (2003), these faculty efforts, in combination with departmental and university resources, build a systemic foundation for student-parents that is supportive, responsive, laying the groundwork for academic success.

Departmental-level

Department and faculty collaborations can be a powerful force when working in conjunction to support and retain student-parents. Often student-parents are less likely to finish their degrees than nonparent graduate students due to the difficulties of balancing their student role with parenting (Quimby & O'Brien, 2006). Preventative education, in the form of student orientations, stress/time management workshops, and strategy sessions designed to help students navigate work, school, and family roles emerge as sustaining departmental elements to all students, especially student-parents (Kirby et al., 2004). Orientations that include discussions about the family-life interface may serve to alleviate initial student fears and set a tone that emphasizes personal wellness (Springer et al., 2009). Included in these seminars should be information related to the potential personal and academic strain that the student-parent can expect as they progress in their graduate program (Smith et al., 2006). Departments can also promote a family friendly environment by encouraging family members to attend orientations and departmental social events (Springer et al., 2009). In addition, graduate programs can also provide resources and referrals for both on and off campus assistance with job searches and opportunities for childcare (Kallio, 1995). Support from the family system is one of many indicators of academic success or failure. Academic learning and growth can create stress in the family system but also contribute to positive experiences for families (Gilbert, 1982; Kirby et al., 2004). Achieving a family friendly department culture alleviates student isolation, recognizes and values life activities outside of the university structure,

and establishes norms of support among students and faculty (Springer et al., 2009).

Departments can also become active in assisting student-parents in gaining access to information. Departments can serve as networking agents that connect parents with community resources, helpful policies, and university links (Springer et al., 2009). Support of this networking can occur by adapting a cohort model, connecting student-parents to support groups, or posting pertinent information on bulletin boards and web pages (Springer et al., 2009). When students are well connected with one another while seeking and finding information, they not only share resources, but they are better able to cope with conflicts between family and school responsibilities (Kirby et al., 2004).

University-level

Achieving a family friendly culture for students is a commitment that extends beyond faculty and department responsibilities. A review of university wide policies, facilities, and resources becomes significant when establishing norms of student-parent support (Springer et al., 2009; Kirby et al., 2004). Sori et al. (1996) found the highest ranked stressor that both students and their spouses agree upon is the lack of time for own marriage/family. Prioritizing time for your own marriage and family happens to conflict with the professional recommendations student-parents give to clients who are seeking couple counseling. Furthermore, student-parents express feelings of guilt about their lack of time and energy for their own children (Springer et al., 2009). Therefore, policies that support extended graduation deadlines, part-time program options, and parent-centered class schedules remain both attractive and beneficial to student-parents (Kirby et al., 2004; Springer et al., 2009). Additional shifts in university policies that allow students to maintain an enrolled status when on parental leave can preserve student benefits, such as medical insurance and also can result in a more stable, seamless, and supportive university environment for new and expecting student-parents (Springer et al., 2009). Universities can make shifts in their available resources and facilities that include the creation of opportunities for child care, affordable dependent health insurance options, and family friendly adaptations to physical spaces (e.g., lactation rooms, changing tables, food service high chairs, and play areas) (Springer et al., 2009). The availability of these campus resources can help with strain-based conflicts that may occur when parenting interferes with the role of being a student especially since academic success or failure is connected to the functioning of the family system (Gilbert, 1982; Kirby et al., 2004). Further, the

described family friendly amenities can be indicated on a campus map (Springer et al., 2009; Williams, 2004).

Discussion

Counseling student-parents not only benefit from their program in the scholarly moment, but also professionally in the future. When explicitly trained to manage personal wellness and access support systems, counselors are better equipped to manage the stress of multiple roles that include parent and clinician (Chen & Slan-Jerusalem, 2009). Students are then taught how to successfully find resources or systems of support to be there for them when their own support networks are lacking (Frasch et al., 2007). Finally, as counseling students, and as parents, these individuals master the art of balancing school, work and family life. This skill is carried into the future, which can contribute to further student success (Springer et al., 2009).

Admitting student-parents into counselor training programs and retaining them also increases student (and ultimately workforce) diversity (Michel et al., 2013). When counseling programs seek and welcome students from a variety of backgrounds and roles, the program, students, and faculty benefit from diverse perspectives and values (Springer et al., 2009). When counseling programs exist as a mixture of students from all walks of life, clinical training and skills are enhanced and graduates are better prepared to meet the needs of diverse populations upon graduation.

Future Research

It is imperative that more information is garnered about the impact of higher education on parents. Springer et al. (2009) suggested there is a need for collecting data that tracks student attrition rates and evaluates intervening variables, such as possible support for student-parents. There is also a need for “researchers...to examine both the perspective of faculty members on ways to respond to students personal issues and students’ views of which faculty behaviors are helpful” (Furr & Carroll, 2003, p. 489).

In addition, understanding the impact of graduate training on family relationships is essential. Sori et al. (1996) explained that graduate school can have a negative impact on student marriages and places couples at a higher risk for divorce. Transitional points in graduate training, such as entrance into a program and graduation can put students at even greater risk (Gilbert, 1982). Clearly, marital stress has a direct impact on child development and parenting (Houseknecht & Hango, 2006). As graduate programs facilitate change within students, there is also a responsibility to prepare and educate students about the

impact this could have on their interpersonal relationships.

More specifically related to counselor training programs, students are encouraged to attend to personal growth, development, and self-awareness (Auxier, Hughes, & Kline, 2003; CACREP, 2009). Students' family relationships play a large role in their personal discovery and awareness (Buelow & Bass, 1994). Similarly, marriage and family therapy students mentioned positive impacts of graduate training programs on their marriage as well as on their graduate studies (Sori et al., 1996). Personal relationships can have a direct impact on students' development as counselors and the quality of work done with clients (Furr & Carroll, 2003). Leonard (2002) suggested that gaining an understanding of students' interpersonal relationships will facilitate anticipation of their needs and enhance their preparation as counselors. Thus, having a rich description of the influence counselor training has on students' relationships with their children can lend itself to better university support for students and promotion of students' personal development.

Conclusion

It is understood that even under the best of conditions, achieving success in higher education can be taxing. For student-parents, the responsibility associated with balancing not only a burgeoning career, but family concerns can make the journey a difficult one. When understanding the impact of higher education on students' relationships with their children, counselors, faculty, departments, and institutions can better attend to students' well beings while also attracting and retaining a diverse student body. This holistic attention to student wellness can decrease attrition and boost student productivity and commitment to quality of work (Matjasko & Feldman, 2006; Springer et al., 2009). With an increased enrollment of older, non-traditional students, institutions have a responsibility to provide an environment where success can be achieved and the educational experience can be positive (Kirby et al., 2004). The first logical step in meeting the needs of the growing student-parent population is to develop a keen awareness of their experiences. This article aims to make the unique needs, struggles, and contributions of graduate student-parents known. As the discourse regarding the needs of student-parents becomes broader, the academic community can respond with supportive structures that aid in the growth and development of students.

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