



How Universities Can Better Support Student Caregivers

Lisa Polakowski Schumacher, University of Iowa

More than half of family caregivers are between the ages of 18 and 49 years old – and as the U.S. population ages, increasing numbers of these caregivers will be enrolled in colleges. Often categorized as “nontraditional students,” college-enrolled caregivers are responsible for children, spouses, and dependent parents with disabilities and chronic illnesses. Nontraditional students of all kinds are more likely to drop out of higher education because of obstacles in their non-academic lives, and this certainly holds true for those who have to balance caregiving with their studies.

Historically, Student Affairs professionals have developed programs and services to meet the challenges faced by underrepresented and underserved students. Given the growing prevalence of student caregivers, academic institutions should keep their needs in mind when distributing funds and creating student support services. While each student caregiving experience is unique, the fundamentals are constant. Very often, student caregivers must choose between attending to a human being for whom they are responsible or attending to academic tasks.

Students managing such choices, balancing caregiving and academic demands, face significant barriers. For example, the amount of time they are able to spend with faculty and advisors is often limited by their caregiving responsibilities. Furthermore, efforts to disseminate information about support services on college campuses typically focuses on traditional students and thus may miss or leave out nontraditional students who are not part of established campus communication channels.

Student-Centered Teaching Can Help Caregivers

Student-centered teaching focuses on individual learning needs to promote persistence and success. Effective student-centered instruction is based on the understanding that one size does not fit all. When an instructor makes accommodations for student caregivers as emergencies arise, such flexibility demonstrates empathy and can promote success rather than indicate compromised standards.

Consider the following examples from the lives of student caregivers I interviewed in my research:

- Waldo told me about his experience during his first year of college. He began caring for his mom, who had Huntington’s Disease, while he was in high school. He grew up in poverty and was the first person in his family to go to college. He chose to stay at home and commute to college so he could continue to care for his mom and save money. During finals week of his freshman year, his mom required brain surgery because of a fall. He asked his statistics professor if he could take the final at an alternative time due to his mom’s surgery. The professor replied that it was his choice whether he came to the final or not, but he would not alter the time.

- Alex, an assistant professor, cared for his mom who had a stroke while he was completing his PhD. He told me he was lucky the stroke occurred around Thanksgiving, when he had a break from the regular requirements of the semester. As he navigated his mom's recovery, Alex only had to negotiate with his dissertation chair – who allowed him to alter deadlines to ensure he had the time he needed to care for his mom.

Alex's dissertation chair practiced student-centered teaching, while Waldo's professor did not. The advantages to students of such teaching are evident, especially for student caregivers, who need a flexible learning environment to succeed academically and develop healthy coping skills while contending with the overriding needs of those for whom they care.

Student Caregivers, Technology, Insurance, and Health

Student caregivers are at a higher risk for stress-related illnesses than their peers, due to their time constraints and intersecting roles; and such difficulties can be compounded when students lack the time and resources to develop healthy coping strategies. Nevertheless, higher education policies have the potential to improve long-term health outcomes for student caregivers by providing access to appropriate supports and resources. Health is at the core of student learning and success. It is in the interest of university administration to ensure access to institutional support and resources, as the following examples suggest:

- Natalia, a PhD candidate and caregiver, struggled with anxiety and depression. Her dissertation advisor empathized with her situation and allowed her to work remotely instead of commuting to campus when her mom needed care. She was fortunate to have access to all of the university's technological resources while at home caring for her mom. Natalia's advisor also encouraged her to apply for emergency funds. The flexibility and knowledge about university resources that Natalia's advisor provided, helped her develop and employ healthy coping strategies.
- Anne, a master's degree student, told me about the university resources she received as a student caregiver. Assistive technology provided by her university was installed on her personal computer, allowing Anne, her husband, and their children to navigate various tools for coping with learning disabilities. Student health insurance provided by the university allowed her to get allergy shots, orthotics, and counseling to cope with anxiety and depression. Financial aid both increased and decreased stress. She worried about paying back the loans, but before she enrolled in graduate school her family did not have the financial reserves to weather a crisis.

Toward Equity for Student Caregivers

Like other students, caregivers seek higher education to improve their economic and social resources, but they face many obstacles and graduate less often than traditional students. To level the playing field for all students, administrators should ensure all students have access to health insurance, appropriate personally tailored learning technologies, and the flexible schedules and supportive resources they need to study even when caring for others. Colleges, students, and society alike only stand to benefit if student caregivers face easier routes to degrees.

Read more in Lisa Schumacher, "The Lived Experience of Student Caregivers: A Phenomenological Study," University of Iowa, 2018.

April 6, 2018

<https://scholars.org>