



Why Higher Education is a Must for Low-Income Mothers

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More than ever a college degree divides the haves and have-nots in American society. College graduates earn wages 56% higher than those of high school graduates, according to recent data from the Economic Policy Institute. Equally important, employment stability increases with a college degree. A 2017 Hechinger Report found that following the 2008 recession over 95% of renewed employment went to workers who were college educated. By 2020 at least two-thirds of all jobs in the United States will require a level of education beyond high school – widening the already considerable income gap between those with and without such educational attainments. People without degrees will fall further behind, especially low-income mothers and their families.

Low-Income Mothers in the Labor Market

For decades, low-income mothers have found themselves restricted to chasing opportunities in the low-wage labor market, which offers insufficient wages and few opportunities for advancement to workers and their families. In the United States, children living in poverty or just above the poverty line suffer as much because of low wages earned by their parents as because of any lack of jobs.

And why are so many of America's low-income mothers stuck in dead end jobs? That fact can be traced not just to blind economic forces, to expanding low-wage jobs, but also to intentional policy choices. Congress's enactment of "welfare reform" in 1996 explicitly discouraged states from offering poor mothers chances to pursue post-secondary education. The new law called Temporary Assistance to Needy Families called for "work first," requiring states to push poor mothers into immediate employment. Impoverished female heads of households, among the most vulnerable in our country, were suddenly told to "become self-sufficient" – and were prodded to do that without access to the college ladder. This work first drive ignored decades of research showing that college attainments – not low-wage jobs – are the best route out of poverty.

Despite this history and the obstacles they face in the current U.S. welfare system, millions of low-income mothers are tenaciously trying to complete a degree and escape poverty. Over the past 10 years, the number of student parents has increased by more than 30%. A 2017 report from the Institute for Women's Policy Research found that nearly five million undergraduate students, a quarter of all undergraduates, are parents of dependent children – and more than seven in ten of these are women. In fact, about 43% of the total student-parent population consists of single mothers. But the road to degrees is difficult. Try as they may, only a little more than a quarter of single parents in college are able to complete their degree within six years of enrollment. They graduate at less than half the rate of other students.

A Model for Providing Services to Students with Children

Recognizing the growing importance of helping student parents continue and finish their studies, some universities have established programs to meet the specific needs of this population – much as they have for veterans, international students and students of color. One leading model of support is the program called Services for Students with Children at Portland State University. This program provides counseling, childcare subsidies, lactation rooms, family-friendly study space and a place where student parents can connect with one another as they juggle complicated lives. In a 2016 interview at Portland State, a 35-year old mom said the program “made all the difference between giving up and keeping on.” Other parents in the program talked about how the climb to graduation is much steeper if you are bringing children along. At the same time, though, some say children are “what keeps me going” as the interviewers heard again and again. Student-parents question why state policies are still focused on pushing mothers into “lousy jobs” rather than supporting efforts “to try to build your future” (as one mother of two put it). Support really matters. As a 28-year-old student confided, “There is no way I will ever be able to support my daughter if I don’t get this degree” yet she was taking the next semester off, because “I’m in debt now, I can’t borrow anymore and I can’t pay for childcare.” Interruptions like this often lead student-parents to drop out.

Lisa Wittorff, the director of the Services for Students with Children program, has watched hundreds of student-parents struggle to graduate: “I see parents who are doing everything possible. They are running from classes to daycare, to jobs and back to the library. At the very least states could count college effort as work effort – and provide fulltime childcare support.” Yet recent research from the Institute for Women’s Policy Research reveals that funding for day care centers has declined since 2002 at universities and community colleges. “It makes no sense,” Shanda a thirty-four year old mother declared after losing childcare support. “This is my fourth try going back (to get a college degree). I want my sons to see that you can succeed. But if I don’t have a safe place to leave them, how am I supposed to show them that?”

Supporting Mothers in College Builds Social Equity

A college education is the surest pathway out of poverty, especially as the demand for a more educated workforce accelerates. Of equal value to American society, attending college gives low-income students the chance to explore and develop their talents and interests, helping them set a positive example for their children and pass on new connections and skills.

Yet these valuable effects are not possible unless poor parents who undertake college studies can gain access to reliable family support services. Childcare and income supplements to pay costs of housing and food are essential to the success of these doubly burdened student parents. Providing the necessary supports is a short-term cost to society, but this kind of social investment stretches far into the future. Beyond providing immediate help to individual students and their families, supporting poor students who study for a better future builds a more educated and equitable nation for all Americans.

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