



SINGLE MOTHERS' CAREER READINESS AND SUCCESS LITERATURE REVIEW

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This literature review presents a summary and analysis of research and reports on single mothers engaged in postsecondary education and training. It includes numerical data on the scope of the population; an explanation of the value of postsecondary education for two generations; typical characteristics and needs as well as variation within the single mother student population; examples of institutions providing career-focused programs; promising program practices; and policy issues. The majority of the literature we located was based on a college student population, ranging from those in community college certificate programs to those in baccalaureate programs. Although fewer studies were available on students in career and technical education, short-term certificate programs, or career pathway programs that bridge to college, available material did indicate similar needs. We also reviewed material on nontraditional students that was not limited to a single mother population.

This literature review is the first step in identifying evidence-based factors and a conceptual framework to guide our exploration of promising program models and practices that support single mothers' career readiness and success.

DATA ON SINGLE MOTHER STUDENTS

Single mothers are an increasing part of the postsecondary student population in the United States. In the 2011-2012 school year, there were over 2 million single mother college students, representing 11% of undergraduates. Eighty-nine percent (89%) of single mother students were low income, with 63% in poverty. Women of color are more likely to be single parent students. Although similar in many ways to other nontraditional students, single mothers face additional barriers to completing programs. Among single mothers who started college from 2003-2009, only 28% obtained a credential in six years, while 57% of women without children did so (Institute for Women's Policy Research [IWPR], 2017). It is important to note, however, that six years may be too short a time frame to assess outcomes for this population since many study part-time and discontinuously (Attewell & Lavin, 2007; St. Rose & Hill, 2013). Looking at the data from another angle, among women age 25 and older, only 31% of single mothers had a bachelor's degree or higher compared to 40% of all women (Institute for Women's Policy Research [IWPR], 2017).

IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Education and training have the potential for life-changing benefits for single mothers and their children. Structural changes due to technology and the increased complexity of work have led to an increase in jobs requiring postsecondary education and a decrease in jobs for those with a high school education or less. These changes were accelerated by the recent recession: from 2010-2016, workers with a bachelor's degree or higher benefited from an increase of 8.4 million jobs; those with an Associate's degree or some college regained the lost jobs for a net increase of 3.1 million, while those with a high school diploma or less lost over 5.5 million jobs. In total, 11.5 million of the 11.6 million jobs created in the recovery went to workers with some postsecondary education. Jobs available for those with a high school diploma or less are increasingly low-skill and low-wage (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2016). Mothers seeking stable and meaningful work find they need postsecondary education.

Another benefit of postsecondary education is the availability of social interactions and access to networks that can assist with employment, services, and emotional support (Attewell & Lavin, 2007; Deutch & Schmertz, 2011; Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2011). Attending and succeeding in an educational program also had psychological benefits such as an increase in self-efficacy (Bober, 2017).

A mother's education has significant short-term and long-term positive effects on her children. Attewell and Lavin (2007) conducted a rare longitudinal study of the effects of higher education on underprepared students and on the next generation. They followed up on CUNY students accepted in the early 1970s when open admissions was implemented. They found that enrollment in college changed the way women raised their children, and parenting practices affected children's outcomes. A mother who attended college had a positive effect on children's early vocabulary and on reading and math scores. Mothers with some college, and even more so, mothers with a bachelor's degree, engaged in more cultural activities with children and were more involved in their children's schools. Mothers' college-going was also associated with greater social capital and community involvement. If a mother had a bachelor's degree, her children's probability of attending college and completing college was greater. Similarly, survey data indicated that the children of undergraduate student mothers showed increased motivation in school and higher educational aspirations (Wilsey, 2013; Karp, Osche, & Smith, 2016).

CHARACTERISTICS OF SINGLE PARENT STUDENTS

Qualitative studies as well as policy reports have given us a picture of common characteristics of single parent students. Their educational progress is frequently disrupted, whether because of pregnancy, caregiving, gendered messages designed to undermine aspirations for education or career, or abuse (Beeler, 2016; Deutch & Schmertz, 2011; Kahne & Mabel, 2009); this includes delayed high school graduation, and means they are likely to be older than traditional-aged students (Women Employed, 2012). They are also more likely to be first-generation students (Miller, Gault & Thorman, 2011). Some researchers have reported on the prevalence of abuse and trauma among adult women students (Bober, 2017; Kaplan-Bucciarelli, 2018). Gender issues related to control and domination by male partners may negatively affect enrollment and persistence. Similarly, negative messages from family members and others may lead to self-doubt (Cerven, 2013; Deutch & Schmertz, 2011).

For single mothers, the most consistent and striking motivation for seeking an education is their children. There are several facets to this. One is the sense of obligation to provide for their children financially and ensure them a better life. Another is the passion to be a role model for their children, to show them the value of education, and to teach them not to give up on their goals (Beeler, 2016; Bober, 2017; Cerven, 2013; Lovell, 2014; Wilsey, 2013). Not having another parent to share in these responsibilities heightens the mothers' sense of determination (Bober, 2017).

Attending postsecondary education may be stressful for many students. For single mothers, this is particularly true since, as sole parents, they suffer from role conflict and role strain (Beeler, 2016). As Beeler reports, they feel pressure to be both an "ideal student" and an "ideal parent" (p.71), an impossible standard. Although they feel they are making worthwhile sacrifices for the future, many student parents report distress at missing time with their children (Beeler, 2016; Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Lovell, 2014; Marx, 2002). Single women also experienced more financial difficulties than other students because of their generally lower wages and added family responsibilities (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011). The need to juggle their many roles may lead student parents to neglect their health (Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2011).

Despite these pressures, some mothers are successful in their pursuit of postsecondary education, and several studies highlight the features that contribute to this. Cerven (2013) portrayed families as more likely to be a positive than a negative influence on single mothers aspiring to or enrolled in postsecondary education. In Martin et al.'s (2014) study of persistence factors, they found that a family member or other champion who assisted in managing time and demands made a difference. Having clearly defined career goals was an important factor in a successful trajectory, while confusion about goals or changes in majors led to lost time. They maintain that highly motivated students with clear goals are able to overcome academic underpreparedness.

VARIATION WITHIN THE POPULATION

A caution is in order not to overly generalize about single mothers when designing programs for them. There are variations among the population depending on the age of the mother, the age of the children, income, and educational backgrounds. In her study of undergraduate student mothers, Wilsey (2013) found that younger student parents focused more than the older ones on extrinsic motivation and improving their job prospects while older mothers had more intrinsic motivation. Similarly, Lovell (2014) found that mothers with older children had self-fulfillment goals while mothers of younger children were more focused on supporting their children financially. A study of programs in eight four-year colleges and universities (Karp et al., 2016) reported that younger student parents tended to be needier and would benefit most from wraparound programs with clear requirements.

NEEDS OF SINGLE MOTHER STUDENTS

Unsurprisingly, childcare is most frequently cited as a crucial need for single mother students, whether in a job training program or in college (Anderson & Hess, 2017; Beeler, 2016; Bober, 2017; Cerven, 2013; Miller et al., 2011; Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2011; IWPR, 2011). Parents

need to arrange childcare not only during class hours, but also when they work; they may need to patch together a series of childcare arrangements, including weekend and evening care (Miller, et al., 2011).

Low-income single mothers have financial needs beyond what is provided by Pell grants; they need to provide for their children as well as meeting their own educational costs. Lack of financial security may force single mothers to work more than half time, creating a lower likelihood of completing an educational program. Housing is also a need for some, connected to lack of financial resources (Karp et al., 2016; Gault, Noll & Reichlin, 2017), and transportation costs may be a barrier to attendance (Anderson & Hess, 2017).

Student support services including counseling, advising, and career planning tailored to this population are needed given their specific challenges and the first generation status of many single mothers (Cerven, 2013; IWPR, 2011). In addition, peer support plays an important role for many by providing advice, information, and encouragement (Marx, 2002).

Given the disruptions in their education and the likelihood of a lower quality K-12 education, single mothers are often in need of academic support. They have a greater likelihood of needing developmental education (Beeler, 2016). They need to develop a new identity as a student in addition to their identities as worker and parent (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Reddy, 2012).

PROGRAM EXAMPLES

Following are some examples of programs that have shown promising approaches towards assisting student parents in completing certificates or degrees. All of the programs combined financial assistance with counseling. These programs used random assignment so that the outcomes of the treatment group could be compared with those of a control group.

Under the umbrella of the Opening Doors Project, two Louisiana community colleges, working with the Department of Social Services and MDRC, and using TANF funding, initiated a performance-based scholarship program accompanied by additional counseling. Students, most of whom were single parents, were granted a \$1000 scholarship each semester for two semesters if they met certain benchmarks. The evaluation showed that the treatment group was more likely than the control group to enroll full-time; they passed more courses; and they had higher rates of registration in the second and third semesters. Due to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, longer-term outcomes could not be assessed (Brock & Richburg-Hayes, 2006).

The Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative (CPI) also used TANF funds while not requiring all students to be TANF recipients. It provided education and training to over 30,000 low-income parents at 22 community colleges and three university technical centers. Case management included advising, career planning, and financial assistance with childcare and college expenses. The evaluation reported that 52% of participants graduated as compared to 24% of the control group. CPI students of color graduated at three times the rate of their non-CPI peers. There was also evidence of income gain and reduction in use of public benefits (*College*, 2018).

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services funded programs through their Health Profession Opportunity Grants. One of these was located in King County, Washington. Program elements included case management/navigation; tuition for healthcare training at community or technical colleges or through vouchers; employment services; and financial assistance. Most participants chose nursing assistant training, and the majority selected private training providers rather than community colleges due to location, schedule, and short training cycles. Close to half of participants were TANF recipients; others were low-income; the majority were age 25 and over; and most were black or Hispanic. After assignment to the treatment group, 82% of participants enrolled in training; 45% attended at least one healthcare training while the others took prerequisites only; and 46% of those in training programs completed. Compared to the control group, the treatment group was more likely to attend training although not more likely to obtain a credential; they were more likely to obtain a job in healthcare (Glosser, Judkins, & Morrison, 2017).

PROMISING PROGRAM PRACTICES AND RECOMMENDED INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES

Through this literature review, we identified some existing, promising program practices as well as recommendations for institutional policies that support students who are single mothers. A common thread throughout is the centrality of relationship-building, communication, and collaboration among staff, between staff and students, among students, and with community partners for successful implementation of these supports.

Comprehensive student supports

Comprehensive supports are recommended so that single mothers have information and assistance in one location rather than piecemeal and so that follow-up is conducted regularly. They need help navigating systems and accessing services, including employment services. Support could be provided through a case manager, staff at a childcare center, or a one-stop center at a campus or community program (Anderson & Hess, 2017; Karp et al., 2016; Beeler, 2016; Cerven, 2013; Romo & Segura, 2010). It is important that students be assigned to a consistent counselor or case manager and that counselors be trained on the lives of single mothers; mandating a set number of counseling meetings is also recommended (Karp et al., 2016; Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011). The case studies cited above used a comprehensive approach to support services.

Data collection and analysis

Institutions could collect more complete data on the single mother student population demographics, enrollments and completion rates, and conduct an assessment of the resources they provide to inform the development of supportive programs, partnerships, and policy.

Professional development

Institutions would better serve student parents if they provided professional development for faculty and staff about that population in their programs or campuses to encourage a more welcoming and supportive environment (Karp, J., 2016; Gault, Noll & Reichlin, 2017). This includes professional development about creating a trauma-informed environment (Kaplan-Bucciarelli, 2018).

Accelerated transition curriculum

There is increasing evidence for the value of acceleration through integrated education and training (basic academic and career and technical/occupation training taught concurrently and contextually) or the integration of remedial and college-level instruction. These strategies move students more quickly to credentials (Wachen et al., 2012). Math requirements and math teaching styles should be re-evaluated since they are often a barrier to progress (Bober, 2017). Transition programs also play an important role in acculturating adult students to the academic environment and bolstering their academic skills, college knowledge, and self-confidence (Kaplan-Bucciarelli, 2018).

Personal and academic support

Role strain, role conflict, and disrupted educational progress result in a need for validation, for reassurance that single mothers belong in an educational program, and for development of a student identity (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011). Peer support groups are important in this context, whether informal or structured (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Marx, 2002). Students may benefit from a cohort model which supports the development of relationships with other students. A community space and activities dedicated to students who are parents is another recommendation (Karp et al., 2016; Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011). Faculty and staff also play an important role through their teaching style and relationships with students. Deutsch & Schmertz (2011) propose incentives for faculty to mentor adult students. Community or peer mentors can also be cultivated. Flexible policies and accommodations for parents under stress contribute to retention (Karp et al., 2016).

Academic and career advising

Effective advising on course selection enables students to take the shortest path to a certificate or degree (Martin et al., 2013). Women students often need encouragement to enter higher paid nontraditional or science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) programs; advisors need training to perform this role (St. Rose & Hill, 2013).

Income support

The Louisiana program described above suggests that performance-based scholarships are effective in promoting persistence. Even a small additional grant can make a difference (Brock & Richburg-Hayes, 2006). In addition, an unexpected expense like a car repair can derail educational progress; emergency funds can make the difference between remaining in school and withdrawing (Anderson & Hess, 2017).

Childcare

On-site childcare or childcare referrals, including to community programs and home care, are valuable program elements. On-site childcare provides convenience, peace of mind, a quality experience for children, and connections to other parents. Collaborative relationships with community childcare programs, including availability of subsidies, may provide access to programs closer to students' homes. A network of vetted home care providers is a cost-effective option for younger children (Karp et al., 2016; Miller et al., 2011).

Access to support services and housing

Some institutions provide staff support to help students determine eligibility for and access public benefits and assist them in obtaining housing (Gault et al., 2017).

Community partnerships

Partnerships with community organizations may be the most effective, practical, and cost-effective means of providing some support services to college or job-training participants, e.g. for childcare, housing, mental health, or domestic violence services (Karp et al., 2016; Gault et al., 2017).

FEDERAL AND STATE POLICY ISSUES

The literature identifies national and state policy issues in four areas: welfare, financial aid, childcare, and workforce development.

TANF

Under the 1996 welfare reform (PRWORA), recipients may engage in up to two years of education, but only if they simultaneously work. Implementation of TANF guidelines varies from state to state, and some states are more supportive of education. Since TANF is a block grant and is not limited to income support, two of the programs described above were able to use TANF funds for educational supports that were not restricted to TANF recipients (Brock & Richburg-Hayes, 2006; *College*, 2018).

Frequent policy recommendations in the literature are to end the TANF time limits on education, allow education to be counted towards the work requirement or reduce required work hours for students, and/or establish stronger relationships between TANF counselors and education programs (Beeler, 2016; Cerven, 2013; Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Faul, 2012; Gault et al., 2017, Johnson, 2010; Marx, 2002; Romo & Segura, 2010; IWPR, 2011).

Financial aid

Low-income students rely on the Pell Grant for their college expenses, but the Pell has not kept pace with the increases in college costs; on average, community college students have an unmet need of \$4000. As a result, most Pell Grant recipients have to work while attending college: almost half both work and study full-time, and some have to take out loans. More than a third of Pell recipients are parents, and they are more likely to be students of color. CLASP recommends that the Pell be strengthened by preserving mandatory funding, raising appropriations caps, and indexing it to inflation (Walzer, 2017). Karp et al. (2016) point out that the FAFSA does not adjust calculations based on the additional financial needs of parents; policies should be revised to better meet those needs. Kahne and Mabel (2009) recommend increasing grant aid overall and providing more funds for part-time students and those seeking certificates. As Congress considers the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, there is currently an interest in allowing Pell grants to be used for short-term certificate programs (Taliaferro, 2018). Karp et al. (2016) recommend work-study opportunities targeted to parents as a more convenient and productive use of their work time.

Childcare

On-campus childcare provides not only convenience for student parents, but also a high quality experience for the children and connections among parents. However, the availability is highly limited and declining: it meets only 5% of the need. In 2009, less than half of community colleges and extremely few private institutions offered childcare. It is rare to find on-campus

afterschool care for children of school age; infant and toddler programs and weekend and evening care are also in short supply. Free or low cost childcare is essential for low-income single parent students. However, costs for institutions, especially for the youngest children, are high, and public colleges have experienced budget cuts. The Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) recommends a dedicated funding source for on-campus childcare facilities; demonstration projects by charitable organizations; coordination of services for student parents through childcare centers; an increase in CCAMPIS funding and a revision of the funding formula; and advocacy for childcare based on the impact on student parents; enrollment, persistence, and completion (Miller et al., 2011).

Workforce development

The workforce development system is inadequate to meet the needs. Kahne and Mabel (2009) make several recommendations to improve the system for single mothers. First, they advocate for greater support for workforce intermediaries as public/private partnerships that support career pathways to high wage jobs. Second, they propose integrating community college funding sources into a career pathways model encompassing GED, remedial, and occupational education, and they advocate for an increase in state funds for public colleges. Third, they support providing simplified access to underutilized income supports such as SNAP through a one-stop model.

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) permits use of funds for supportive services such as childcare, transportation, and housing assistance. Single parents are identified as special populations in need under WIOA and the Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (Gault et al., 2017).

There is a need to identify high-wage job opportunities, including those that are not traditional for women (Mississippi Low-Income Child Care Initiative, 2017). Short-term certificate programs are valuable in leading to employment in a field of interest, but there is less evidence that they provide sufficient income gain for a family-sustaining wage (Farrell & Martinson, 2017); ideally, they would be the first step in a career pathway, as promoted under WIOA (Taliaferro, 2018). Women tend to choose or be steered toward middle skill careers that pay significantly less than those that are predominantly male; they may have concerns about discrimination or harassment in male-dominated fields. Despite a policy that states increase the numbers of female and male trainees in fields where they are underrepresented, enforcement is lacking. More could be done in the areas of recruitment and counseling (Field, 2018).

CONCLUSION

With a powerful motivation to improve the lives of their families and set a positive example for their children, many single mothers are pursuing education and training that will lead to better paying work and a meaningful career. The obstacles they face are daunting, but there are policies and practices that can help these determined and resilient women move forward.

While the needs of single mothers overlap with those of other nontraditional postsecondary students, review of the literature has demonstrated that the single mother population has been identified as a group of special interest in academic studies and in policy reports by nonprofit organizations. This may in part be a reflection of the growth in this category of student. The

focus, however, has generally been on students in a college or university setting. Further investigation is needed to determine to what extent the findings are generally applicable to single mothers in career and technical education and career pathways programs.

The literature review provides a basis for our planning project to lay the foundation for viable and scalable implementation nationwide of programs and policies that prepare single mothers for success in career pathways. As we consider the findings and gaps in this initial review, the project team will develop a conceptual framework and questions for investigation of program models. We will examine the assumptions in the literature that the provision of additional supports will smooth the way for single parents to succeed in the existing educational structures and consider various models.

After developing our conceptual framework, screening criteria, and questions, we will identify programs to study through interviews with staff and faculty, lead administrators, and single mother students. We will document the models and practices we find through detailed program profiles. This investigation will lead to recommendations for an implementation and dissemination plan.

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