THE FUTURE IS FAMILY-FRIENDLY:
Supporting Community College Student Parents in Library Spaces

Jennifer Arnold

INTRODUCTION
Parenting and caregiving students represent a significant portion of community college students. According to the Institute for Women’s Policy Research’s analysis of National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data, more than four million college students are parents with children under 18. The Institute has also found that 42% of student parents are community college students and, on average, 26% of the community college student body are parents. In total, about 1.6 million community college students are raising children. Additionally, the majority (62%) of mothers in college are single parents and are likely to have very young children. Issues related to child-care (expense and availability), non-standard work schedules, transportation, and disparities in access to technology are additional barriers to enrollment and completion of academic programs by student parents; in 2021, the Institute indicates that nearly 1 million community college students have left without a degree, representing 61% of student parents. According to the NCES, the pandemic resulted in 24% of undergraduate students who identified as female reporting difficulties finding stable child care, while 14% of students identifying as male experienced child care difficulties. As a result, community college student parents can benefit from institutional support that recognizes their need to balance their competing obligations as both students and parents.

Creating lactation/parenting support spaces and family-friendly study rooms in community college libraries, then, represents a critical opportunity to support the retention and completion of student parents and caregivers, particularly mothers. Research indicates that on average student parents have higher GPAs than non-students and that their role as parents provides motivation for their educational goals. The literature on the role of the physical library in the campus experience of students suggests that the library is often the most open and available student space on campus. Lactation spaces and family-friendly study rooms in community college libraries can then offer student parents support as they balance their responsibilities as parents with their academic goals, and recognizes that child care has experienced significant disruptions both prior to and during the pandemic.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Library buildings play an important role for students on a college campus. In addition to being open to all students and having longer hours that most services on campuses, library spaces help foster connection between students and the academic institution. Students view the library not as a building that houses collections, but one that provides spaces and environments conducive to study and collaboration. However, parenting and caregiving students often perceive the library as unwelcoming.

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One very common theme in the literature is the hesitation student parents have to use library spaces with their children. Winnick (2022), Carliner and Everall (2019), Scott and Varner (2020), Bladek (2021), and Lanclos and Winterling (2018) all describe feelings of stress, anxiety, and concern about bringing children into an academic library. Parents hesitate to bring their children with them into the library because they want to avoid conflict with other patrons or staff over noise issues, or more broadly as a result of their understanding that the academic library is not an accommodating space for children, particularly very young children. Children can be noisy, or need to move around, and have other needs (snacks, bathrooms, diaper changes) that seem antithetical to the traditional stereotype of academic libraries as quiet, serious, and formal adult spaces.

On a more fundamental level, student parents may also perceive the entirety of the academic environment as, if not actively hostile, often deeply indifferent to their caregiving responsibilities and familial obligations. The student without caregiving obligations is the norm to which academic policies and practices are designed. Policies on attendance, group projects or assignments, and operational hours for essential business offices often do not take into consideration the needs of parenting students Sallee and Cox (2019) refer to this as a “care-blind approach.” Bladek (2021) also writes that student parents’ “competing obligations as students and parents impacts their relationship with classroom faculty, administrators, and peers; in an academic environment that does not attend to their unique circumstances and needs, student parents often feel alienated and even excluded.” Sallee and Cox argue that this “sends the message to the students that their caregiving responsibilities conflict with the college’s conception of an ideal student.”

The literature on student parents also contains numerous stories of student apprehension around needing to access services with their children in tow, including a general sense of stigma for needing to bring children into non-child friendly spaces, including in Bladek (2021), Scott and Varner (2020), Carliner and Everall (2019), Paustenbaugh and Belliston (2018). Huerta (2022) notes that one of the few times parenting students become visible is when they experience negative consequences or judgment for violating social norms or expectations by bringing their children to campus. In fact, policies about children in academic libraries can be difficult to locate and may be written using negative terminology around children, singling them out for the potential of being disruptive or noisy.

Parenting students with access to a family friendly study space felt like they could bring their children to the library without disturbing their fellow students. Family friendly library spaces also acknowledge one of the most significant challenges facing parenting or caregiving community college students: time. Throughout the literature, students express the difficulty they face balancing their academic and familial responsibilities. Trying to build a class schedule around child care or school schedules, find a time and place to study, or to attend office hours or visit on-campus services limits when and how much a parenting student can engage with their college. Having a space to study with their children opens up more time in their day when academic activities can take place. Beyond just mitigating negative reactions, family student rooms can make students feel welcomed and wanted on campus.

Similarly, lactation spaces work to reduce the anxiety of student parents while they are on campus and extend the time a mother breastfeeds by providing a convenient space to either nurse their child or pump breast milk. On college campuses, while provisions for and policies around support for breastfeeding employees tend to be clearer, places and policies for lactating students are often overlooked; writing such policies and making them highly visible on college websites and in student handbooks would help nursing mothers make better informed decisions about their return to school. In general, providing lactation spaces in libraries helps reduce the logistics nursing mothers face in finding a place to nurse or pump, and thus is another way in which the library can help suggest that being a parent or caregiver and being a student are not “incompatible.”

FAMILY-FRIENDLY SPACES AT CENTRAL PIEDMONT COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Central Piedmont Community College is a large, urban multi-campus institution located in Charlotte, North Carolina, that serves a majority female and majority-minority student population. The college provides a com-
prehensive slate of programs of study with more than 300 degree, diploma, and certificate programs designed to serve the citizens and employers of Mecklenburg County. Additionally, the college offers literacy programs, corporate and continuing education, GED and Adult High School, and houses four middle college high schools in conjunction with Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

For the 2021-2022 academic year, the college’s total unduplicated headcount for curriculum students was 24,158. Table 1 provides a demographic overview of Central Piedmont’s student population by gender and race/ethnicity.

Overall, the age of Central Piedmont’s student population has been trending younger. Table 2 provides a breakdown of student population by age.

The Central Piedmont Library has libraries on each of the college’s six campuses, staffed by 32 full time and 14 part-time employees. In July 2022, the new Hagemeyer Library on Central Campus opened after three and half years of construction as a part of the college’s larger Parr Center building, which houses most student-facing departments of the Student Affairs division, as well as a student union space with dining and a 450 seat theater. The Hagemeyer Library provides a total of 30 bookable study rooms for student use, two of which are specifically designated as family study rooms. The library also houses one of three quiet rooms designed for lactation and other respite needs in the Parr Center as a whole.

The inclusion of these spaces arose from research on similar spaces in other academic libraries, a consideration of ACRL standards around physical spaces, and an awareness of student needs derived from a variety of sources, including demographic data, past surveys, focus groups, and usage of the library by student parents. Central Piedmont does have a specific policy that governs the presence of children on campus and the library has been a space where student parents could bring their children when needed. With the opportunity to design an entirely new facility, the Library decided to do more to make the library actively welcoming for student parents.

As noted in Pastenbaugh and Bellison (2018), the ACRL Standards provided an underpinning for the Central Piedmont Library to address the needs of parenting students. In Standard 2 (Professional Values), standard 2.5 reads “The library commits to a user-centered approach and demonstrates the centrality of users in all aspects of service design and delivery in the physical and virtual environments.” Standards 6.7 and 6.8 on space can also be seen as a foundation for creating spaces conducive to usage by caregivers. Standard 6.7 states “The library provides clean, inviting, and adequate space, conducive to study and research, with suitable environmental conditions and convenient hours for its services, personnel, resources, and collections.” Standard 6.8 states “The library’s physical and virtual spaces are informed by users.” In each of these three standards, support is provided for (1) understanding student parents/caregivers as a subset of the overall population of users and (2) providing spaces that support their usage of the physical library.

Internal surveys conducted by the college’s Planning and Research Department also suggested the importance of addressing the needs of student parents. The survey results indicate the library is the most used service by both new and continuing students. The survey also indicates that one of the primary reasons that students stop attending is due to family and caregiving responsibilities. Both of these data points point to the importance of the library as a place that can provide a layer of support to student parents.

**Family Study Room Usage:**
The Central Piedmont Library’s family study rooms opened on July 5, 2022. The two study rooms were furnished differently to address varying needs of student parents. The first-floor room allows for more than one family to

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use the room at a time, with individual seating and computers for three adults. This study room also offers a DVD players and large screen, small upholstered ‘poofs’ for children to sit on, a small table, and toy storage with books, coloring supplies, and small toys. An assortment of DVDs is also available in the room. The room on the second floor allows a student parent or caregiver to study with a group with their child present. The room offers a child-size table and chairs, a play kitchen, and toy storage with books, coloring supplies, and small toys. Table 3 provides usage statistics for the two rooms.

Figures 1 and 2 below illustrate bookings by day of the week and by time of day. The usage patterns here generally track with the busiest days and hours of the day for the library as a whole.

The 58 unique users of the family study rooms were also emailed a Project Outcome for Academic Libraries space survey; Twelve of those users responded to the survey. While this is a small number of respondents, the open-ended comments in the survey were quite reflective of the experiences of students reported in the literature on supporting student parents, particularly around having a space that made them feel comfortable bringing their child to the library:

“I was able to focus fully on studying while being near my baby and knowing he was able to play in a safe environment without disturbing others.”

“Amazing space for a parent...I like that it is private, and she can roam around freely without me having to worry about what she is doing. I like that it was closed off from others so that she did not disturb the other students.”

“I like that I can study while my child is able to safely occupy himself. It allows me to have family interaction and study.”

The survey comments also indicated that a student and a college employee from Career Services had used the room as a meeting space. The college employee noted “This was a great resource for meeting with a student who has a child. Allowed the child to play while we worked on the student’s resume.”

At this time, the library’s Quiet Room has not been surveyed; the Quiet Rooms also serve as spaces for prayer, meditation, and stress-relief, among other wellness-related usages, making it difficult to isolate the experience of those using the room for lactation/pumping.
SURVEY OF SUPPORT SPACES IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE LIBRARIES FOR STUDENT PARENTS OR CAREGIVERS

The experience of operating the library’s family study rooms for the first six months of the new library’s opening prompted a consideration of how other community college libraries addressed the needs of parenting/caregiving students. In conjunction with the college’s Planning and Research Department, the Central Piedmont Library sent out a survey to other community college libraries asking about the availability of family-friendly study spaces and lactation rooms, what features or items were included in the spaces, and how the availability of those spaces was communicated to students. The surveys were sent out in February 2023 and resulted in 51 responses. Figure 3 provides the range of student FTE for the respondents.

Family-Friendly Study Rooms

Of the 51 survey respondents, 41.2% currently provide a family-friendly study space for students, while 58.8% of libraries do not currently provide such a space. For libraries providing a family-friendly study space, Table 4 illustrates the most common items in that space.

The survey also allowed respondents to enter any other items they included in their family student spaces; the most common other included were whiteboards and markers.

Additionally, survey respondents were asked what communication methods they used to make their student population aware of the availability of spaces designed for use with their children. Table 5 illustrates the percentage of respondents using the following methods.

Of the responding libraries without a family-friendly study space, 87.1% would like their institution to provide this type of space to the student population. The most common barriers to creating spaces that welcome students and children included limited space, lack of funding, college policies prohibiting children on campus, noise issues, and a lack of administrative support.
**Lactation Rooms**

Lactation rooms within community college libraries are less common than family study rooms. Of the 51 survey respondents, only 29.4% of libraries offered a lactation space. Table 6 presents the percentage of respondents including the following features in their spaces for nursing parents.

The methods of communicating the presence of lactation spaces within the library varied from the methods used to promote the availability of family student spaces. Table 7 summarizes the percentage of respondent's using the listed methods.

Of the 70.6% of respondents with no lactation space within the library, 81.3% expressed an interest in their library providing space for nursing parents. The most common barriers to providing a lactation space including limited space, lack of funding, college policies prohibiting children on campus, and the availability of lactation rooms in other buildings on campus.

**BEST PRACTICES AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The literature, Central Piedmont’s operational experiences, and the survey responses suggest a variety of best practices for creating and operating both family friendly study rooms and lactation spaces in community college libraries. Godfrey et al. (2017), strongly recommend have clear, written policies and user expectations for family-friendly study spaces. Established policies help reduce the potential for conflict over the use of the space. Several survey respondents suggested including a statement that no children may be left unattended in family-friendly study spaces. If possible, locating family-friendly spaces in close proximity to a bathroom is helpful for students studying with young children. Overall, locating the family study space in an area where noise can be contained or is at a distance from quiet study spaces will be most effective in making student parents/caregivers comfortable using the space. Survey respondents also suggested placing cleaning supplies in family study spaces. Child-sized furniture and a variety of activities to occupy children while their parent or caregiver studies makes it clear that children are welcome in the space. Small toys (nothing that generates sound), coloring supplies, books, puzzles, and games are commonly found in family-friendly study rooms.

For lactation spaces specifically, providing access to a sink is a well-established best practice; a sink of enough depth for a nursing parent to clean breast pump parts is ideal. Multiple electrical outlets are necessary to for

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<td>Chair with No Arms</td>
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<td>Footrest or ottoman</td>
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<td>Sink</td>
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<td><strong>Use of Communication Methods for Lactation Rooms</strong></td>
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<td>None</td>
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<td>Staff Approaching Students with Children in the Library</td>
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<td>Distributing Information through other Departments</td>
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plugging in a breast pump. Comfortable seating, including a chair with arms for a nursing parent to rest their arms and a footrest of some kind helps alleviate the physical demands of nursing or pumping. Room reservation or booking policies should be cognizant of the time demands of lactation, providing nursing parents with the ability to schedule multiple sessions per day with enough time to both pump and clean pump parts.

Collaboration and partnerships are essential to the success of family-friendly and caregiver support spaces in community college libraries. Godfrey et al. (2017) suggest that partnering with other departments on campus can encourage support, donations, and funding for supplying family-friendly spaces with necessary items like books, toys, and cleaning products. Beyond material support, seeking out partnerships provides an opportunity to spread the word about the availability of student and lactation spaces for parenting or caregiving students. Several survey respondents indicated a lack of awareness about lactation spaces, for example, so this type of marketing is key to increasing usage. For libraries working on creating spaces for these students, college departments in student affairs or student life areas often make natural allies in advocating for the needs of parenting students.

On an institution-wide level, one of the most common barriers to providing family-friendly spaces in the library is strict policies prohibiting children on campus. Although there are areas on any community college campus that are dangerous (construction labs with saws, science labs with chemicals), policies need to recognize the reality that there are times where parents can only access campus with their children. NCES statistics show that a significant number of community college students are parents or caregivers to young children; the academic success of these students should be supported by policies that allow for or even welcome the presence of children on campus. The Urban Institute's “Roadmap for Change to Support Pregnant and Parenting Students” calls for allowing children in the library and for family-friendly study spaces with activities for children.

**CONCLUSION**

The Urban Institute supports family-friendly supports on college campuses because “they not only provide direct support for students with children but also promote inclusion, belonging, and academic success.” These ideas align with the mission of community colleges and their libraries. As open access institutions, community colleges have a significant role to play in the opportunity for parenting and caregiving students to reach their educational and occupational goals. As the Urban Institute's work indicates, students who feel comfortable and safe revealing their status as parents or caregivers can lead to feelings of belonging and inclusion rather than the feelings of alienation and exclusion so commonly expressed in the literature. Bladek (2021) writes "academic libraries are uniquely positioned to spearhead family-friendly initiatives that would offer some support, however limited it may be, to student parents on their campuses.” By taking steps towards creating policies and spaces that not only recognize the needs of parenting or caregiving students, but actively and visibly support and welcome them into the library, community college libraries can make the most of their unique position.

**NOTES**

15. Lanclos and Winterling, “Making Space.”
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


