

SB 794: OR Student Parent Data Collection in Oregon's Public Post-Secondary Educational Institutions

Listening to Parents in College

My name is Lisa Dodson. I am a retired research professor and currently an affiliated scholar at Brandeis University as well as the Co-chair of the Oregon Chapter of the Scholars Strategy Network, a national policy research organization. I have been interviewing low-income mothers for more than 30 years including, recently, low-income mothers in college in Oregon. Some highlights of what student parents have told me include:

"I felt like I had to hide being a mom."

Most parents said they felt invisible managing childcare schedules, jobs and classwork. Some told me that professors were far more tolerant with students who were experiencing personal problems than they were with parents whose children were ill or who had a childcare breakdown. College administrators and teaching staff are largely unaware of the significant percent of parents in their classrooms and uninformed about all the obstacles that they face.

1. Counting parents would makes these students truly visible and raise the importance of addressing their identity -- just as colleges seek to address other aspects of student diversity.

"I want my children to see that we can do this; I want to be an example."

Every parent I interviewed was a first-generation student and said that their children were the biggest motivation to go to college. They wanted to model study habits, pride in learning and determination. They were convinced they were paving the way for their children to achieve school success. But as national data reveal, student parents often face work overload and childcare conflicts and drop out without a degree – though often with debt.

2. Counting student parents would allow us to learn more about the risk of dropping out and the university supports that could reduce it, with two-generational effects.

"It was great to learn that I wasn't the only one"

Parents who were able to meet up with other student parents said that they found that community was incredibly helpful. At Portland State University -- where there is a student-parent Resource Center -- parents meet each other, offer each other advice and encouragement reducing the feeling of being isolated. As the presence of students parents becomes better understood, upperclassmen could becomes supports for freshmen as valuable resources in reducing the high dropout rate among these students.

3. Counting parents would raise the profile of this growing student population, "normalize" their presence and motivate higher education leaders to support their efforts to graduate.

Final comments

Listening to student parents describe their daily efforts taking care of their children, fulfilling class requirements and often holding down a job as well, it is amazing that any of them succeed. Importantly, national research reveals that among the 2 millions single mothers in college – should they graduate – it could have a significant impact on the nation's overall poverty rate. *This is would be true on the state level as well.*

In recognizing this student population – **counting them** -- we would acknowledge that, despite multiple obstacles, these parents are doing exactly what our society holds as responsible behavior and personal determination to move up. For now they remain a largely invisible presence on college campuses.

Please count student parents !!

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