



# Briefing Paper

IWPR #C468

May 2018

## Time Demands of Single Mother College Students and the Role of Child Care in their Postsecondary Success

Single mothers enrolled in postsecondary education face substantial time demands that make persistence and graduation difficult. Just 28 percent of single mothers graduate with a degree or certificate within 6 years of enrollment and another 55 percent leave school before earning a college credential (IWPR 2017a). The combination of raising a family on their own, going to class, completing coursework, and holding a job can place serious constraints on single mothers' time that can force them to make hard choices about their pursuit of higher education. Expanded supports for single mothers in college would allow more women to consider and complete college degrees and enjoy economically secure futures.

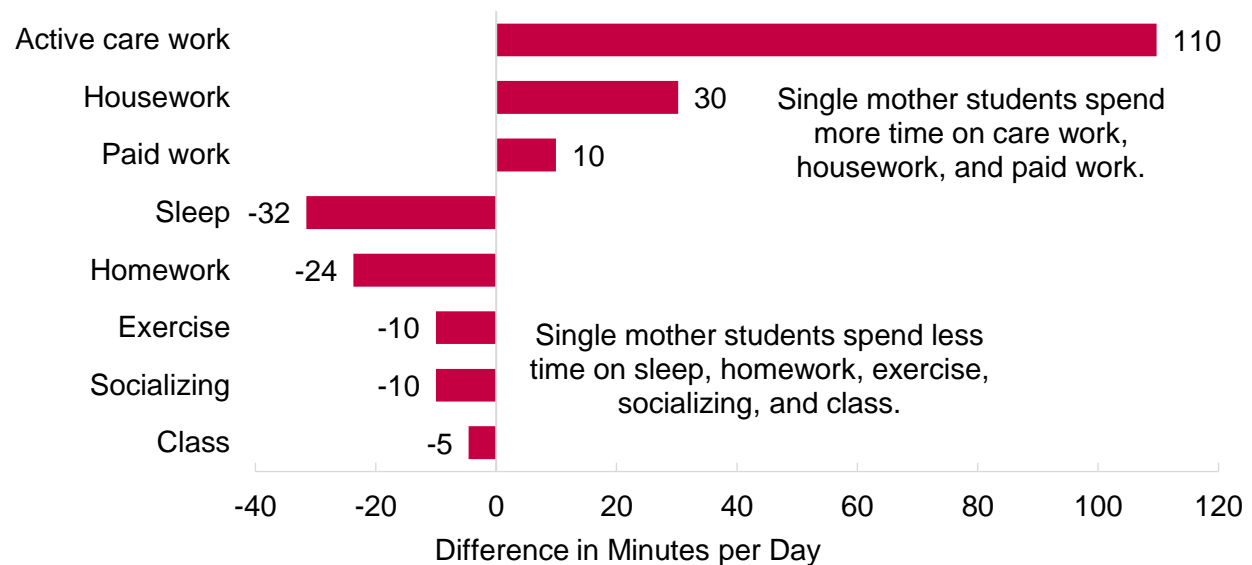
### Time Use Among Single Mothers in College: Tradeoffs between Child Care, Studying, and Self-Care

IWPR analysis of data from the American Time Use Survey shows that single student mothers have much greater time demands and distribute their time differently than other women in college. Single mothers in college spend much more time providing care and doing housework, and more time in paid employment, than women students without children (Figure 1). On average, single mothers who attend college full time spend nine hours a day on care and housework—two hours on active child care, six hours on supervisory care, and about two hours on housework (Appendix Table 1). Women college students without children spend under two hours each day on all of these activities combined (Appendix Table 1). On a weekly basis, single mother college students spend an average of 15 hours (2.1 hours per day) in direct child care activities, such as playing with children, reading to them, bathing them, or feeding them, and 43 hours (6.2 hours per day) providing supervisory care for children (Appendix Table 1).<sup>1</sup> They are also less likely than their peers without children to spend time on activities that are important for physical and psychological health, such as sleep, exercise, and socializing, that can play an important role in their educational success (Figure 1). Work and caregiving demands leave less time for single mothers to focus on coursework (Figure 1), threatening their academic success and potentially putting their financial aid eligibility at risk (Federal Student Aid 2016).

**Single mothers in college full-time spend nine hours a day on care and housework.**

<sup>1</sup> Time spent caring for children includes “activity-based” forms of child care, such as playing with or reading to children, as well as “supervisory care” which is often combined with another primary activity like cooking or cleaning.

**Figure 1. Differences in Time Spent on Activities in Minutes per Day: Single Mother Students vs. Female Non-Mother Students, 2003-2016**



Notes: Includes full-time college (two- or four-year) students aged 18 and older. Calculated using fourteen years of data to amass a large enough sample (2003-2016, for calendar years 2002-2015).

Source: IWPR analysis of data from the American Time Use Survey data (<https://www.bls.gov/tus/>).

## Child Care Associated with College Completion, but Difficult to Find and Pay For

Reliable child care arrangements could help single mothers balance the demands of higher education, caregiving, and employment, yet access to affordable, quality child care can be hard to find. The national median cost of center-based care for an infant (roughly \$10,400 in 2016) is just under one-third of working single mothers’ median annual income (\$32,000 for single mothers aged 25 and older) and the median cost of 4-year-old care in a center (roughly \$8,300) is 26 percent of their median annual income (IWPR 2017b; IWPR 2018).

Child care can be more affordable for students at campus-based centers than at other child care centers, and is often higher-quality, given that campus centers commonly serve as labs for training early childhood development students. The number of colleges with child care centers, however, has been decreasing steadily over time. As of 2015, 49 percent of public four-year colleges and universities, and 44 percent of community colleges (where single mothers are most likely to be enrolled), had child care centers on campus (IWPR 2016b). Demand for campus-

**Student parents who used the campus child care center had an on-time graduation rate that was more than three times higher than those who did not use the center.**

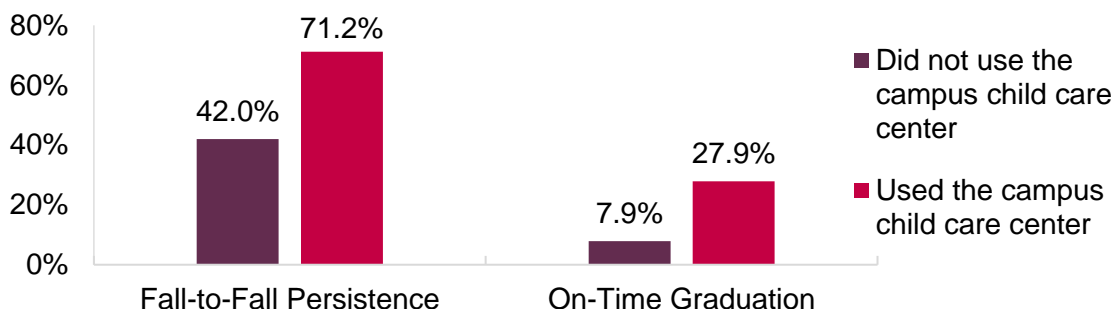
based care is high, however, where campus child care centers remain. A 2016 survey found that the average waiting list at campus child care centers included 80 children (IWPR 2016a).

Access to campus-based child care can help students complete college. Qualitative research has found that having an affordable, reliable source of

child care helps student parents stay in school (Hess et al. 2014).

While rigorous evaluations of the effect of child care access on student parent outcomes are limited, analysis of data from Monroe Community College (MCC) in Rochester, NY suggests that access to campus child care improves student parents’ postsecondary outcomes. MCC collects information on parent status from its students through a required survey completed once a semester during course registration, and the campus child care center records students’ use of care on campus. Analysis of data for 10,000 student parents with children under 6 who were enrolled at MCC between fall 2006 and fall 2014 finds that approximately 71 percent were women, 60 percent were single parents, and roughly 3 percent used the campus child care center. Of the nearly 4,800 single mothers who attended MCC during this time, just under 4 percent used the campus child care center at some point during their educational careers at MCC (DeMario 2017).

**Figure 2. Monroe Community College Student Parent Outcomes by Usage of the Campus Child Care Center, 2006-14**



Source: DeMario 2017. “Outcomes of Monroe Community College Student Parents Who Used the Campus Child Care Center vs. Those Who Didn’t, Fall 2006 - Fall 2014. Unpublished Overview of Research Findings.”

Among all students with children under six, campus child care center usage was associated with substantially higher fall-to-fall persistence rates than among student parents who did not use the center (DeMario 2017).<sup>2</sup> Roughly 71 percent of student parents who used the campus child care center persisted to the next fall semester, compared with just 42 percent of those who did not use

<sup>2</sup> The sample size of single mothers in the MCC dataset was too small to draw definitive statistical conclusions about the relationship between campus child care center usage to their outcomes. There were 165 single mothers in the sample who used the campus child care center and 4,606 who did not (DeMario 2017).

the center (Figure 2). In addition, student parents who used the center had an on-time graduation rate that was more than three times higher than those who did not use campus child care (28 percent compared with eight percent; Figure 2).<sup>3</sup>

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Increased access to child care would improve single student parents' ability to succeed in higher education by freeing up time that they could devote to self-care. Better access to affordable child care—on college campuses and in communities more widely—could lead to significant increases in degree attainment among single mothers, improving their long-term economic security and benefiting their children and society more broadly. The following recommendations would allow policy and practice to better support single mother college enrollment and success:

- Federal, state, and local governments can make more funding for child care available for students on college campuses.
- States should allow college enrollment to count toward work requirements associated with Child Care Development Fund child care assistance.
- Colleges can build partnerships with child care resource and referral services, and provide child care information, on college campuses and websites.
- States and higher education institutions can provide targeted financial aid to allow students with children to minimize time spent working and to allow students to afford more paid child care.
- Governments can take steps to make Early Head Start and Head Start programs more widely available on college campuses.
- Colleges can implement strategies to establish flexible and welcoming environments for students with children (Schumacher 2015).

---

<sup>3</sup> There were some other differences between the two groups, such as motivations for enrolling at MCC (students who used the center were more likely to say their goal was transferring to a four-year college and students who did not were more likely to have goals of upgrading skills or getting a GED, for example), race/ethnicity (with students who used the campus child care center more likely to be White; students who did not were more likely to be Black), and number of children (students who used the center were more likely to have two or more children; DeMario 2017). Income levels and pre-college test scores were comparable across the two groups. The lack of random assignment makes it difficult to rule out the possibility that unobserved differences between the two groups that might have affected the differences in outcomes. Since there has never been a random assignment evaluation of the effect of child care on college outcomes for parents, however, this suggestive evidence is important for the field.

**Appendix Table 1. Average Hours Spent on Activities: Single Mother Students vs. Female Non-Mother Students, 2003-2016**

	Hours Per Day		Hours Per Week	
	Single mother students (N=744)	Female non-parent students (N=2,228)	Single mother students (N=744)	Female non-parent students (N=2,228)
Sleep	8.5	9.0	59.5	63.0
Exercise	0.1	0.3	0.7	2.1
Socializing	0.7	0.8	4.9	5.6
Paid Work	2.6	2.4	18.2	16.8
Housework	1.7	1.0	11.9	7.0
Shopping	0.5	0.7	3.5	4.9
Class	1.1	1.2	7.7	8.4
Homework	1.2	1.6	8.4	11.2
Active Care	2.1	0.3	14.7	2.1
Supervisory Care	6.2	0.4	43.4	2.8

Notes: Supervisory care overlaps with other activities, but does not overlap with active care. Includes full-time college (two-year or four-year) students aged 18 and older.

Source: IWPR analysis of data from the American Time Use Survey (<https://www.bls.gov/tus/>). Calculated using fourteen years of data to amass a large enough sample (2003-2016, for calendar years 2002-2015).

## References

- DeMario, Mary Ann M. 2017. “Outcomes of Monroe Community College Student Parents Who Used the Campus Child Care Center vs. Those Who Didn’t, Fall 2006 - Fall 2014. Unpublished Overview of Research Findings.”
- Federal Student Aid. 2016. “School-Determined Requirements.” In *2016-2017 Federal Student Aid Handbook*. Vol. Volume 1 — Student Eligibility. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. <<https://ifap.ed.gov/fsahandbook/attachments/1617FSAHbkVol1.pdf>> (accessed November 2, 2016).
- Hess, Cynthia, Sylvia Krohn, Lindsey Reichlin, Stephanie Roman, and Barbara Gault. 2014. *Securing a Better Future: A Portrait of Female Students in Mississippi’s Community Colleges*. Report, IWPR #C417. Washington, DC: Institute for Women’s Policy Research and the Women’s Foundation of Mississippi. <<https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/wpallimport/files/iwpr-export/publications/C417.pdf>>.
- IWPR. 2016a. “Analysis of Data from Survey of Campus Children’s Center Leaders. Available upon Request.”
- . 2016b. “Student Parents’ Access to Campus Child Care Continued to Decline in 2015.” Quick Figure, IWPR #Q051. Washington, DC: Institute for Women’s Policy Research. <<https://iwpr.org/publications/student-parents-access-to-campus-child-care-continued-to-decline-in-2015/>> (accessed January 23, 2017).
- . 2017a. Institute for Women’s Policy Research Analysis of Data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003–04 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, Second Follow Up (BPS:04/09).
- . 2017b. Institute for Women’s Policy Research (IWPR) analysis of data from the 2015 American Community Survey, Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (Version 6.0).
- . 2018. IWPR analysis of data from Child Care Aware of America 2017. “Parents and the High Cost of Child Care: 2017 Appendices.”
- Schumacher, Rachel. 2015. *Prepping Colleges for Parents: Strategies for Supporting Student Parent Success in Postsecondary Education*. Working Paper, IWPR #C406. Washington, DC: Institute for Women’s Policy Research. <<http://www.iwpr.org/publications/pubs/prepping-colleges-for-parents-strategies-for-supporting-student-parent-success-in-postsecondary-education>> (accessed January 25, 2017).

*This briefing paper was authored by Lindsey Reichlin Cruse, Barbara Gault, and Joo Yeoun Suh, of the Institute for Women’s Policy Research, and Mary Ann DeMario, of Monroe Community College. Funding was provided by the Jewish Foundation for Education of Women, with additional support from the ECMC Foundation.*

**For more information on IWPR reports, please visit [www.iwpr.org](http://www.iwpr.org).**

The Institute for Women’s Policy Research conducts and communicates research to inspire public dialogue, shape policy, and improve the lives and opportunities of women of diverse backgrounds, circumstances, and experiences.