

DIVERSITY IN ACADEME

Campus Child Care, a ‘Critical Student Benefit,’ Is Disappearing



Mark Abramson for The Chronicle

Karen Perez, executive director of the child-care center at Passaic County Community College, plays with children. The college’s president hopes to expand the program in coming years, but it’s not clear where the money would come from.

By Scott Carlson | MAY 18, 2015

PATERSON, N.J.

As a first-generation, low-income college student, Ashley Abregu faces outside challenges. In this city, a destination for immigrants, where a quarter of the population lives below the poverty line, there are many people like her.

But Ms. Abregu carries another big challenge, one that comes in a tiny package: Her name is Aubrie, and she is 3 years old.

Ms. Abregu, who was born in Peru and raised in the United States, is a single mother — one of about 1,800 parents who attend Passaic County Community College here. But among them, she is lucky: She and about

100 other parents got their children into an all-day child-care program run by the college, in a space adjacent to its main building. And because the program is supported by the local public schools — to give children a jump-start before entering kindergarten — Ms. Abregu pays nearly nothing.

Diversity in Academe: First-Generation Students

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Without it, "I don't think I would be able to go to college," she says early one Wednesday morning at the child-care center, where the walls are plastered with 3-year-olds' renderings of shamrocks and the Cat in the Hat. If Aubrie weren't enrolled here, her mother would have to pay about \$200 a week for private day care and spend hours transporting her daughter on buses. Ms. Abregu relies on her own father for support; while she was pregnant, Aubrie's father was arrested for drug dealing and deported.

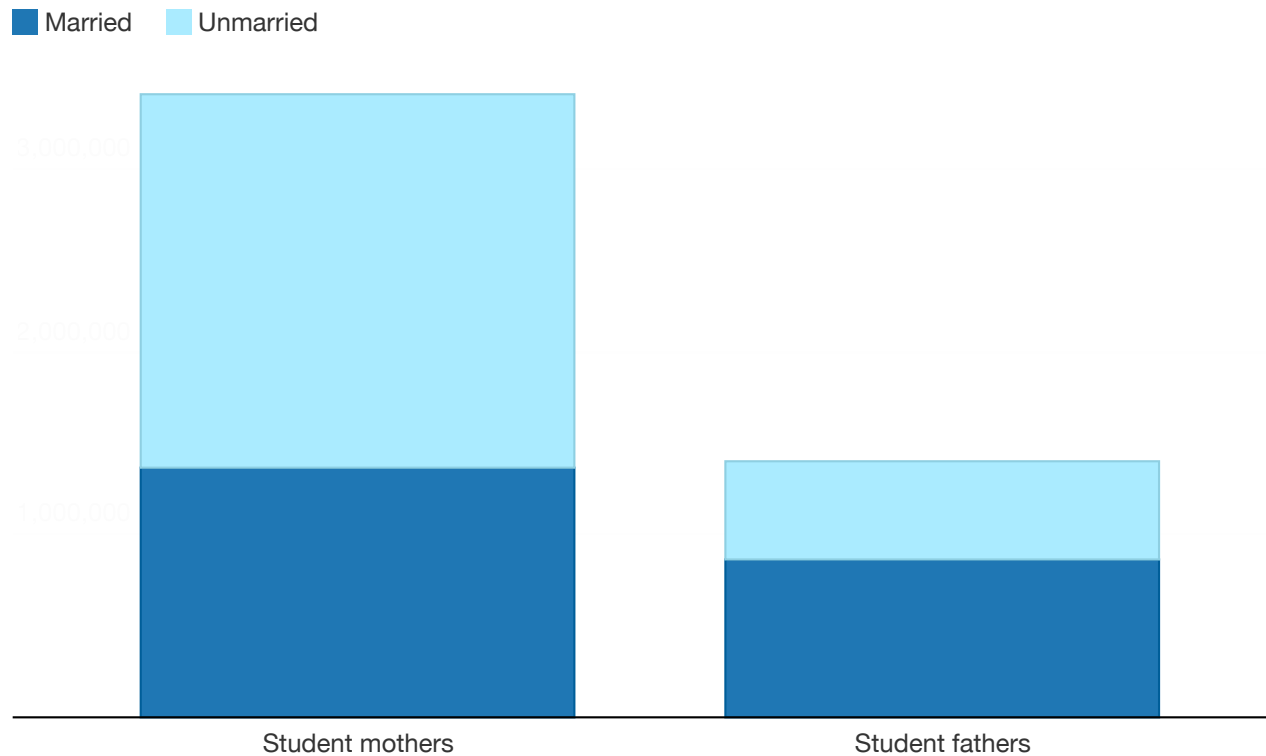
Now majoring in the humanities, with plans to work in political campaigns and health activism, Ms. Abregu hopes her daughter will emulate her. "We come here, and she says, 'Mommy, your school,'" pointing to the college, Ms. Abregu says. Since coming to the child-care center, Aubrie has been more social, more eager to learn. "Kids are going to follow whatever you do, especially at this age."

Ms. Abregu's story is one often overlooked in higher education, yet it is more common than people assume. According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research, nearly five million college students — about a quarter of all undergraduates, and 30 percent of the community-college population — are parents. About 3.4 million of those student-parents are women, and two million of them are single mothers.

For those parents, child care is "the critical student benefit," says Catherine Hill, vice president for research at the American Association of University Women.

Parents on Campus

Nearly five million students in college are also parents. Most of them are women, and more than half of those women are unmarried. About 30 percent of students at community colleges are parents.



Source: Institute for Women's Policy Research analysis of Education Department data from 2011-12 [Get the data](#)

"Students say that if they don't have child care, then the other support services just don't mean that much," she says. "If you don't have child care, then you can't go to tutoring or a mentoring program or any other number of support services that schools offer."

But Ms. Hill and others who study the needs of low-income women in college have noted that many institutions, under financial pressure, are reducing, privatizing, or even eliminating their child-care programs, even as the number of low-income and first-generation students in college rises. According to the AAUW and the National Center for Education Statistics, less than half of the nation's community colleges offer on-campus child care.

"The trend we're seeing is that it's declining," says Barbara Gault, executive director and vice president of the Institute for Women's Policy Research, although she notes that hard numbers are difficult to find, as the issue is generally not studied. Her research and interactions with college administrators, however, have uncovered a pattern: College officials say child-care programs are too difficult and expensive to maintain, and, what's more, they sometimes have a cynical view of the service and of parents in higher education. One administrator told her that his college "can't deal with everyone's personal problems."

Parenthood is "viewed as the irksome baggage that poor people come with," she says. She and Ms. Hill note that colleges spend money on other student services and facilities that benefit small portions of the student population: counseling services, athletics, science labs. Child care should be seen as another such service, they say.

In Many States, Campus Child Care Is Hard to Find

Some 30 percent of community-college students are parents, but fewer than half of the nation's more than 1,000 community colleges offer on-campus child care.

Source: American Association of University Women analysis of Education Department data [Get the data](#)

Still, at a time when community colleges in particular are financially stressed, a child-care center can be a burden that some administrators see as expendable.

In 2009, Highline College, just south of Seattle, discontinued its 30-year-old child-care program when it was forced to cut \$2 million from its \$25-million operating budget. Lisa Skari, its vice president for institutional advancement, says the college had been subsidizing the program at an annual cost of about \$300,000 — paying \$5,000 of the \$8,000 cost of caring for each child there. "It was unfortunate, because in 2004 we had just opened a new child-care facility that was state of the art," she says. Now a local nonprofit group is renting the center to offer child care, and the student government has set aside money to help subsidize the cost for some needy parents.

Brookdale Community College, in an affluent part of New Jersey, near the shore, has had a child-care center since 1974 that can serve up to 100 children. But it has been a financial burden, losing \$284,000 on an \$800,000 budget last year. Administrators are now discussing how to hand it over to a private operator.

Child-care professionals often criticize privatization, arguing that the profit motive can undermine teacher salaries and services. David Stout, dean of enrollment development and student affairs at Brookdale, says the college may have to continue subsidizing the child-care service to maintain quality and keep it affordable.

At a child-care center at La Guardia Community College, part of the City University of New York, children not only get healthy food, socialization, and comprehensive lessons in literacy, but they also take advantage of some of the college's facilities — taking swimming lessons in the pool, for example. But

"Students say that if they don't have child care, then the other support services just don't mean that much."

maintaining funding for the program is always a battle. Parents in the CUNY system organize bus trips to Albany every winter to lobby state lawmakers, asking them to continue giving CUNY nearly \$3 million a year for its 18 child-care centers.

When asked about the value of the child care, the parents often deliver a remarkable message: The community college is not only helping them advance socioeconomically; it is also setting up their children for opportunities the parents never had.

Lauren Patterson, a La Guardia student, didn't learn how to read until he was 16 because he spent part of his childhood in the group-home system and bounced among various schools. His son, who is 2, has learned to recognize Spanish and English words through the child-care center. "When we go home, we don't watch TV," he says. "My son picks up a book." Mr. Patterson, a veteran, wanted to go to New York University, but there were no child-care services for students there, and private child care would cost him several hundred dollars a week. Cheaper day-care services in the neighborhood plopped the kids in front of a television all day. "I am not going to forgo my son's education so that I can get an education," Mr. Patterson says.

Passaic County Community College started its day care in 1999, after the Board of Trustees determined that affordable, high-quality child care was a pressing need among students. The child-care center also has a curricular connection: Students in the early-childhood-education program work there to get experience.

The college managed to pay for its services through a combination of state funding and various grants. In the late 1990s, preschool was included under a previous court decision that required the state to distribute school funding more equitably. The college formed a partnership with the Paterson Public Schools to subsidize the

child-care program.

Linda Carter, an assistant professor in early-childhood education and a founding manager of the day-care center, got more support from federal agencies, nonprofit foundations, and the state to pay for programs in literacy and nutrition, and for evening child care.

Ms. Carter says that before the day-care center opened, student mothers would leave their kids alone in the library or bring them to class, which was disruptive. Some mothers would trade off babysitting duties in the hallways. When some single mothers turned up at college without their children, Ms. Carter wondered, Were the kids at home alone?

"It was scaring me to think what they were doing just to get to class," she says.

Of course, many parents at Passaic County might still be in that position. The day-care center takes only 3- and 4-year-olds, and only up to about 120 kids. Steven M. Rose, the college's president, says he hopes to expand the program in the next couple of years — but how the college would pay for that is unclear.

The hassles of running the child-care center go beyond the expense. Mr. Rose, as the official "owner" of the center, had to get fingerprinted and reviewed by law-enforcement agencies. He is occasionally embroiled in disputes between teachers, touchy parents, and their toddlers. Some years ago, for reasons he still doesn't understand, he had to replace the flooring in the center's kitchen because it did not meet strict licensing standards. And closing the college in a snowstorm gets more complicated when kids need to connect with their parents.

Other challenges are more serious: If a child turns up at school with bruises, or if a court bars a relative from seeing a child, the involvement with the police and child-protection services that can result aren't typically part of a college president's job.

Given hassles like those, some of Mr. Rose's peers at other community colleges look askance at his aspirations to expand the child-care center, he says. "They think I am crazy," he says. "But they didn't have our demographics."

For students who are parents, having a kid is another barrier to graduation.

"It's all about taking away the obstacles," Mr. Rose says, "and which ones we can mitigate, and which ones we can't."

This article is part of:

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