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Navigating Normative Boundaries

The Experiences of Student Parents

As a result of changes to the economy and increased access to higher education, campus administrators, faculty, and staff are increasingly likely to be working with students who are parents balancing family and school. In this article I examine how student parents describe moments when their academic and domestic roles appear to come into conflict in the context of social welfare office and on college campus settings. Relying on Dorothy Smith's institutional ethnographic methodological framework, I turn to the voices of student parents themselves as they describe the myriad ways that policies and organizational procedures either facilitate or obstruct their pathways to success. Specifically, I reveal the ways that these policies and procedures press students to redefine, change or defend their actions and decisions in reference to normative ideologies. These students' interpretations of their experiences reveal the quandaries that emerge when competing normative frameworks that define particular statuses or behaviors as stigmatizing come into conflict. From this research, we may gain insights as to how state policy, postsecondary institutions, and individuals are challenging or reinforcing cultural norms defining conceptualizations of gender, family and education.

Walking across the regional state university campus where I teach in central Connecticut, I am no longer surprised by the sight of a student mother navigating a baby carriage along the pathway or soothing a toddler on a bench. As a result of both changes to the global economy and increased access to higher education, campus administrators, faculty, and staff are increasingly likely to find themselves working with students who are parents balancing family and school. This trend is due in part to the increase of older and returning students present on college campuses around the world. Recent reports from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development reveal that

in industrialized nations the population of older and returning students on college campuses has dramatically increased over the past few decades. In the United States, where this study is conducted, approximately 25 percent of undergraduate students are raising children under the age of 18 and over half of those students are single parents (NCES *Digest of Education Statistics*). The largest percentage of these student parents are found on community college campuses—32 percent of the students attending two-year public colleges report caring for dependents as compared to nearly 13 percent who attend four-year, baccalaureate-granting public institutions (NCES *NPSA Study*). Although it is clear that student parents are more likely to be found enrolled in two-year associate- or graduate-level programs, over the past 30 years *all* categories of postsecondary institutions (two-year, four-year, private, public, for-profit, and non-profit) have experienced record levels in their enrollment of student parents (Choy; NCES *Digest of Education Statistics*).

In the U.S. the increased presence of student parents on college campuses can be traced historically to changes in cultural, economic, and political forces during the mid-twentieth century that resulted in simultaneously increasing the general need for and access to postsecondary institutions. Beginning with the implementation of the GI bill after WWII, which provided educational opportunities for U.S. veterans, and the passage of the *Higher Education Act* (HEA) of 1965, universities and colleges began to expand postsecondary opportunities for previously underrepresented groups, including women, racial/ethnic minorities, and individuals with disabilities. The women's movements of the 1960s and 70s ushered in cultural changes that redefined not only family dynamics and the workplace (Moen and Yu), but also public colleges and universities, which were legally required by the federal government beginning in 1972 to open their doors to women as a result of Title IX, a landmark amendment to the HEA of 1965. Further, with the implementation of the federal Pell Grant program, which made available needs-based grants to pay for postsecondary schooling, and the Stafford Loan program, which provided low-interest loans to college students, men and women with limited economic resources who were previously prohibited from pursuing a college education were increasingly able to pursue such a goal.

Such access to college has increasingly become important due to the shifting nature of work, particularly in industrialized nations; as many manufacturing jobs have given way to jobs in the service and information sector, a college degree has steadily become requisite in order to attain long-term financial stability. In the U.S. rising demands for and access to a postsecondary education paralleled the expansion of public college and university systems, which doubled in size between the years of 1950 and 1990 (Aronowitz). The social expectation that individuals of all backgrounds could and likely should acquire

postsecondary credentials in order to attain and maintain middle-class status also intensified during this time period (Lazerson). In short, over the past 40 years myriad cultural, political, and economic changes have shaped current student demographics that have in one way or another facilitated the growth on college campuses of the student population in general and the student parent population in particular.

Many colleges have responded accordingly to the increased presence of student parents on their campuses, offering services or programs targeting the particular needs of students balancing family and school. More than half of the over 4,000 colleges and universities in the U.S. have childcare facilities available on site or nearby (Boswell). Others offer comprehensive academic support programs, many of which have historically targeted mothers returning to school (e.g. Tufts University's REAL Program, Smith College's Ada Comstock Program, and Agnes B. Scott's College's Irene K. Woodruff Return to College Program). The founders and directors of these programs understood the complex and sometimes overwhelming demands placed upon student parents and so developed support services to address these students' unique needs.

Importantly, student parents are redefining what it means to be a college student (clearly communicated in the terms used by researchers and college administrators to describe them: "nontraditional" or "adult learners") and are daily negotiating contemporary notions of gender and what it means to be a "good" mother or father (Christopher; Hays "Cultural Contradictions"; Williams; Wall and Arnold). Often caught in the crossroads, these students are simultaneously typical and atypical students and parents—that is, like their "traditional" student peers, they are pressed to study for midterms and meet with their professors, but they also must, like their parent peers, prepare meals for their children and ensure for their children's care throughout the day, every day. As student parents navigate these roles, they are frequently required to make decisions all while considering what might be appropriate in a particular academic or domestic context. When student and parent roles collide, how do these student parents make sense of their situations? How do they negotiate normative social expectations and potentially stigmatizing situations (Goffman *The Presentation of Self; Stigma*) and either subscribe to or challenge dominant ideologies regarding what it means to be a "good" mother and student?

Student parents are subject to various normative orders, perhaps most notably the complex gendered, moral frameworks that constitute mothering and fathering ideologies (Christopher; Doucet; Duncan and Edwards; Gerson; Gilligan; Hays "Cultural Contradictions"; Risman; Williams). Low-income student parents who apply for support from social welfare programs must also deal with negative stereotypes surrounding welfare programs that emerged over the course of the twentieth century and fueled political debates regarding family

values and the purpose of public assistance (Abramovitz; Reese). Additionally, all of these students must deal with normative orders regarding the “traditional college student,” who in many educational surveys is defined as someone who attended college directly after high school, works fewer than 35 hours a week and has no dependents (Choy). Student parents’ daily experiences are very much shaped by these normative ideologies and, as becomes clear in this analysis, by the political and educational institutions in which they function. One focus of this study is to interrogate the ways policies and procedures in state agencies and colleges are implicated in the process of constructing, maintaining, and challenging normative ideologies that in turn can create or dismantle stigma. Ultimately, this research examines the complex interplay between individuals, social institutions, and normative ideologies, particularly as they shape contemporary conceptualizations of education, gender, and parenthood in the larger culture.

Methods and Data

Beginning in the fall of 2007, I began interviewing student parents pursuing two-year, four-year, or post-graduate degrees, in the state of Connecticut. Locating these students was particularly difficult because the colleges and universities where these students are working towards their degrees do not collect reliable data regarding students’ parental status. Researchers examining the experiences of student parents in the U.S. have in recent years appealed to colleges, universities and national survey centers to collect data that will allow for easier and more accurate identification of student parents and caregivers who are attending postsecondary institutions (Goldrick-Rab and Sorenson; Miller et al). Given these existing limitations, I relied on purposive, non-random sampling methods to identify potential participants. Student parents responded to posters distributed around campuses of two public universities and two public community colleges, all of which were located in the northeastern U.S region. Although most students responded to the posters, at least six parents learned of my study from a parent whom I had previously interviewed. All 40 parents interviewed, 29 mothers and 11 fathers were, at the time of our meeting, raising children under the age of 18 while working to achieve their academic goals. Student parents were paid \$25 for participating in the study—a nominal fee that I hoped would aid in their paying for child care while they met with me. Student parents completed a brief written questionnaire, covering basic demographic information regarding themselves, their family, and their work and educational history. After student parents completed the questionnaire, I utilized a semi-structured interview format, asking them a series of questions regarding their familial and educational experiences. I also asked them to share

their perceptions of cultural beliefs pertaining to education and parenting. Full interviews lasted from one to four hours, with most interviews averaging 90 minutes. Results from the semi-structured interview portion were taped, transcribed, and analyzed with the aid of NVIVO qualitative analysis software.

In composing interview questions, I used an approach to interviewing that relies on the tenets of institutional ethnography, as theorized by Dorothy Smith. Smith explains that “the institutional ethnographer works from the social in people’s experience to discover its presence and organization in their lives and to explicate or map that organization beyond the local of the everyday” (11). Importantly for Smith, “people” remain at the heart of such inquiry, but the researcher’s focus is directed at the texts and systems of social organization, in other words the “ruling relations,” that shape our everyday movements. Building on Michel Foucault’s conceptualization of discourse, Smith argues that an institutional ethnographer will examine the ways that individuals use language to participate in and shape translocal discourse. Importantly, however, researchers must balance their exploration of the social with the “people’s standpoint.” That is, she argues, “the product of such an inquiry is an ethnography that should stand up to examination from other sociologists and from those whose everyday lives are implicated and active in producing the institutional processes on which the research has focused” (71). As a result, I have supplemented findings from interviews with an analysis of the policies and regulations that students cite as shaping their educational experiences. Because “structural lag” can exist between the changing needs of individuals and the organizations and social structures in which they are embedded (Riley and Riley), I intend to highlight the ways that student parents’ perceptions of and experiences with stigma are shaped by the organizations in which they function. In the following sections, I describe some of my preliminary findings, focusing on how student parents’ moral understandings of their experiences are shaped by the various offices and organizations in which they interact every day.

Organizational Policies and Procedures – “Traditional” Clients and Students

The findings that I describe below reveal the ways that student parents’ interactions and experiences are distinctively influenced by dominant discourses regarding parenting and being a student. I also examine stigma and explore the way stigma functions in students’ daily lives. Students’ interactions and experiences are shaped within a number of social environments including but certainly not limited to state welfare offices, classrooms, extracurricular meeting places, and academic advising and counseling offices. The people who construct and administer the policies and procedures in these various social locations

frequently rely on contemporary notions of typical or traditional parents, clients, and students, which inform their understanding of how things “ought to be.” The student parents often describe moments when their individual needs remain unmet because their very presence challenges the normative order due to their not fulfilling “traditional” expectations of welfare applicant, parent, or student. On the other hand, they sometimes reveal the benefits of their nontraditional status when select individuals—professors or coaches, for example—acknowledge their unique potential and needs and, rather than dismissing, address them and provide additional support. In the section below, I examine such moments in more detail.

Social Service Offices

Many of the students whom I interviewed receive some form of non-educational state assistance by way of housing subsidies (Section 8), nutrition subsidies (WIC – Women, Infants and Children; or SNAP – Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), cash assistance (TANF – Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), or child care subsidies (TANF/Care for Kids – CT). However, the students who receive these benefits frequently share their frustration with the rules and regulations of these programs, and several cite the specific ways that their participation in these programs forces them to reconsider their educational goals because they do not fit the “typical” conceptualization of a low-income parent.

Cynthia, a 23-year old mother of one pursuing her bachelor’s degree in psychology and Dave, a 20-year old father of one pursuing a bachelor’s degree in business management were explicitly encouraged by their welfare case managers to either forgo applying for state assistance or forgo their educational goals. Such recommendations on the part of case managers result from relatively recent changes in federal welfare policy that restrict states from using federal funds to support the needs of students pursuing 4-year or graduate degrees. Although U.S. 1996 welfare reform laws significantly altered federal welfare, changing it from an entitlement program that supported education to one that instead focused on rewarding marriage and employment, some states nonetheless retained their long-term educational opportunities for college student participants (CWPS; U.S. Congress). However, in 2004 when the 1996 law was reauthorized, even those states that generally supported the long-term educational goals of TANF participants were encouraged to cease or cut their support as a result of explicit language that in a proposed amendment to the program sought to limit higher educational support to only vocational or 18-month certificate programs. In debates following reauthorization, legislators argued that TANF “was not intended to be a college scholarship program” (U.S. Department of Health 37460), clearly indicating that a typical applicant for public assistance is not expected to pursue a four year degree or higher.

Such language implies and the policy itself states that TANF participants are expected to work in exchange for their benefits, thereby communicating that locating formal paid employment takes priority and that pursuing a college degree is a privilege for only those parents who can afford *not* to be enrolled in a public assistance program. Cynthia and Dave are not deemed worthy of that privilege. Even though they view their educational goals and their seeking of welfare benefits as consonant with what any good mother or father would do to improve their chances of attaining self-sufficiency, current policies do not support their educational and career goals.

When Cynthia first applied for assistance, she was told by her welfare case manager to seek funding elsewhere and instead to appeal to family and friends for additional support. Her case manager expressed concern that if Cynthia were to receive state assistance, she might be “sucked into the system,” reinforcing the negative stereotype that the receipt of state assistance is morally problematic and that a more responsible mother would go to the father or one’s family for support. Cynthia, however, rejects this conclusion and recommendation—she does not communicate regularly with the father of her child, who recently went to jail, and she has withdrawn from her family, particularly from her father with whom she has experienced a contentious relationship. On moral grounds, she feels it best if she and her son are removed from what she describes as “negative” influences, and so she seeks financial assistance from the State to enable her to attain economic independence. Her case manager, on the other hand, perceives the situation differently, and due to existing welfare laws Cynthia feels forced to compromise her sense of what is right by continuing to communicate with her son’s father and her own father for financial support. She admits that these relationships are wreaking a toll on her psychological well-being, and so she has sought out counseling support, which in her words has been so far “ineffective.” This situation has also left her feeling that motherhood has forced her to surrender her feminist values, which she reveals when she confides, “I think if I didn’t have my son I would still be like hardcore feminist.” She defines being a feminist as someone who promotes “equal rights for both men and women,” but she feels that in being a mother she has had to give up her pursuit of equality and to become dependent on the men in her immediate life. Without social supports to aid her in caring for her son, she feels that she is forced to “make do” and rely on resources that she feels compromise her sense of self.

Like Cynthia, Dave was also encouraged by his social service office case manager to put his educational goals on hold and to participate instead in work training programs and search for employment. In describing a typical meeting with his most recent case managers, he maintains, “they try to push me to go to the work programs, but I’m not going to go there and look for

a job at Target or anything ‘cause I’m getting a four year university degree!” Dave believes that his long-term outlook ought to be valued in this context but instead finds his perspective being challenged by his case managers, who recommend that he take an entry-level retail position in lieu of pursuing his business degree. Dave’s educational goals are in part influenced by his very traditional views of gender—he expects to take on the “bread-winning” role in his immediate family and believes that his work as a student will eventually improve his employment prospects and affirm his role as a good father. Living in a neighborhood where lone mothers prevail, Dave admits that he is “one of the only fathers on the block” and so feels particularly driven to counter stereotypes regarding absentee fathers. Ultimately, Dave believes that a good father prepares for the long-term well-being of his family; therefore, he rejects his case manager’s recommendation and voices his disagreement with public policy, which in his mind contradict his goals as a father and as a man.

Both of these students are receiving either Pell grants or subsidized Stafford loans, and both are low-income according to federal guidelines and would benefit from the child care and cash assistance provided to other parents like them as they seek to attain financial stability. However, state policies at the time of these interviews prevented them from receiving such assistance. As such, due to their “non-traditional” status as college students applying for social services, they were pushed away from public assistance programs or, alternatively, encouraged to leave behind their long term educational goals. Although most of the social welfare case managers with whom these students worked generally believed that a college student should not be applying for public assistance, some case managers were supportive of their educational goals. Dave recalls one case manager who “just understood how much me being in school helps out,” but then he didn’t see her again, and even though she supported his being in college, she was limited in the assistance she could provide due to the strict policies in place. Restrictive welfare policies and the negative stigma attached to welfare receipt ironically end up promoting the perverse idea that “good” parents are not receiving public assistance in the first place. In part, because the programs that provide aid to low-income parents are socially stigmatized (Abramovitz; Reese), these students’ case managers push their clients away from public assistance, even though these students perceive the denial of such aid as obstructing their potential to be successful parents and students and, in their eyes, strong feminists and fathers.

Campus Culture

In addition to federal and state welfare policies limiting some students’ access to financial resources, many students also discuss how campus policies and procedures tend to respond to the needs of so-called “traditional” students.

Carolyn, a 27-year old mother of two working towards her bachelor's degree in graphic arts technology, expresses her keen frustration when I ask her how she conceptualizes student success: "College is for kids that don't have kids. That's what it's made for—kids that don't have kids, but life takes its toll." These students clearly understand that according to institutional norms that they are not considered typical and so at times perceive themselves to be a "problem" on campus.

Students enrolled in 4-year institutions who had previously attended two-year community colleges frequently describe cultural differences between the two types of campuses. Heather, a psychology student and 40-year old mother with four children, describes some of the differences she has observed between her prior experience at a two-year community college and the four-year state university that she currently attends:

Heather: Now, I don't think it's accepted to bring your babies into class like I did when my oldest was little. I don't—maybe that was the school I was in or the area I was in. I don't know 'cause a lot of girls did. Here I don't see that [laugh] you know? I think at [the community college] I had a Saturday class. There was a mom who brought a couple of her kids, and then they just sat in the back, but they were fine. The teacher, I think, the professor, they worked it out with that one.

Fiona: But here you feel there's a different culture?

Heather: I'm the oldest in my classes, so nobody has kids. I think there's one girl who has a two-year old in my class, but I don't think anybody else does.

As Heather reveals, student parents are acutely aware that as parents, they are a distinct minority on four-year college campuses, particularly when they are older and therefore more visible.

Many of the younger parents, on the contrary, realize that they do not look like "traditional" parents and so do not draw attention to their parental status on campus. Cynthia confesses, "The way I look [professors and students] don't think I have a son. So like I never really say—and like they never really ask, so they don't know." Whether or not students decide to reveal their parental status, in other words, to "come out" as a parent, is not a simple matter. In his classic sociological analysis *Stigma*, Goffman describes the state of potentially becoming recognized as stigmatized as "discreditable." Like Cynthia, Drew, a 23-year old father who is studying communication, is very much aware that

one's age can contribute to one's feeling potentially discreditable. Drew confides, "Being a young parent, you can tell, it's a little more stigmatized. You're seen as irresponsible. You're seen as, I don't know, this or that and the younger you are the worse it is." Not knowing how their parental status might be received on campus, young parents often choose to play it down, only revealing that they are parents when they feel they have no choice. And even then, such revelations can backfire. Lindsay, a 26-year old education major describes the moral conundrum she faces each semester: "If I were to ask for something of the teacher and the teacher gave it to me, the rest of the class would think, 'Oh, it's 'cause she's a parent. Or, it's because she has a kid—she's playing the 'kid card'." Lindsay recognizes both her minority status and the resulting risk that she might be perceived negatively by her peers and professors if she were to highlight that status when her parental and student responsibilities conflict.

As is revealed in many of these testimonies, the apprehension of "coming out" on a college campus is very much shaped by the culture created for student parents on two-year and four-year campuses. Although the vast majority of students describe positive interactions with their professors, most of them nonetheless often hesitate to draw attention to their parental status, and many respond that they are more likely to open up with professors who have children and talk about their children. Several of the mothers, including Jackie, a 31-year old lone mother studying English, express that they are more comfortable talking with women students and professors about their parental status than with men students and professors. Jackie shares, "I have had like two negative experiences here with professors and they happened to be men. I feel kind of intimidated to tell them because ... I don't know ... they don't have any connections with kids, not all of them do, but I feel like they didn't, so I don't want to risk that feeling again because it's not fun." Jackie's negative experiences with two men professors reinforce gendered stereotypes, whether they continue to represent reality or not, regarding men's and women's domestic roles and the potentially gendered valuations of those roles.

Importantly, the presence of child care facilities is cited by nearly all participants as being an integral organization shaping such a culture. Four students describe their experiences with the child care center at the community college that Heather attended in the past. The two-year college provided child care for students at a discounted rate, \$3 an hour, which was both highly affordable and convenient. The child care center at the four-year college that Heather currently attends is both expensive and limited in terms of the number of students it can accommodate—it is also located off-campus and hence less visible to the campus community. When I asked students to offer recommendations to improve student parents' experiences on campus, nearly all mention the importance of providing discounted and flexible child care, not only because of the important

services provided but because of the symbolic message such a service imparts. Although nearly a third of these students have been able to turn to family members or close friends for child care assistance, they nonetheless cite the relevance of providing such a service as a means of morally affirming their parental roles and legitimating the institution's commitment to student parents in general.

Interestingly, in one case, institutional commitment came by way of a program designed to serve the needs of another student minority—athletes. Dave formerly received an athletic scholarship, which he had to forfeit when he left the team to attend to his parenting duties after the birth of his son. Nonetheless, Dave's coach allowed Dave to retain some of the perks he had received as a student athlete, perks that Dave admits have helped to keep in school. Due to their intense training schedules, athletes are provided with priority registration benefits and scheduled study halls that are facilitated by academic coaches. Dave has been able to register early and arrange his classes around his son's day care and his partner's work schedules. In addition, he continues to attend athlete study halls as he has found that they help him to keep up with his school work. Dave's former coach not only allows Dave to continue to receive special services and benefits reserved for athletes, even though Dave is no longer on the team, but also his coach actively worked with residence life offices in an attempt to provide campus housing for Dave, his partner and child. Dave has little hope that such a benefit will be provided, but he expresses sincere appreciation for his coach going to such lengths to provide support for his family and demonstrating such moral respect for his roles as a father and as a student as he pursues his baccalaureate degree.

Discussion and Conclusion

From this research, we may gain insights as to how state policy, postsecondary institutions, and individuals are challenging or reinforcing cultural norms defining contemporary understandings of family and education and how student parents are navigating that landscape. Clearly more research must be conducted to determine whether these tentative findings regarding these students' experiences can be generalized to the population of student parents on other campuses around the U.S. and in other countries where governmental or private aid to student parents is more or less forthcoming. Nonetheless, this study provides a means for beginning to understand how social institutions and policy are implicated in reinforcing or challenging social stigmas that result in disenfranchising student parents.

One important theme that emerges from this analysis is that of students' feelings of displacement—in the welfare office and on campuses where child care and/or the presence of children are non-existent or minimal, these stu-

dents are highly cognizant of their marginalized and sometimes stigmatized status. Current welfare policies and campus procedures and resources were not developed with their needs in mind. There exists “a mismatch,” as Matilda Riley and John Riley have identified, “between people and the social structures, institutions, and norms that surround them” (1). In social service offices, such a mismatch produces situations in which student parents end up forgoing applying for public assistance because they do not represent the “typical” social welfare applicant. On college campuses, many student parents, particularly the younger students, describe the process and pressure of “outing” themselves to professors, staff, administrators and fellow students, who generally assume that they are not parents. Only when their parental roles come in conflict with their student roles do many of these student parents publically share what they perceive to be their stigmatized parental status. Sometimes upon “outing” themselves, professors, administrators, and staff respond by providing additional support, as occurred in Dave’s case with his athletic coach; other times their fears regarding stigmatization are confirmed and they are told that they must adapt to the existing organizational structure. We see the latter occurring with Jackie, who was publicly humiliated by her male professor for violating class attendance protocols. In both cases, these students, like many other student parents, are very much aware of their outsider status and the negative implications of potentially being labeled an atypical actor within these social organizations. Carolyn perhaps expresses their collective frustration best: “I’m not looking for handouts. That’s not what I want. I’m just looking for maybe some kind of understanding.”

“Understanding” can be attained by acknowledging the ways policies, procedures and the general culture of college campuses and social service offices shape the daily potentially stigmatizing experiences of student parents. Through examining these experiences, we can identify opportunities for change that might positively alter the institutional functioning and culture of such spaces, resulting in student parents feeling more accepted and less ostracized. Providing such opportunities is important for ensuring gender equity as well because a vast majority of the student parents on college campuses are mothers; and as cited earlier, a significant proportion of these student parents are lone mothers, a group that has been historically stigmatized in the dominant culture (Abramovitz; NCES *Digest of Education Statistics*). If colleges and universities were to provide priority registration, sufficient and affordable child care facilities, and study hall or group meeting opportunities for student parents, these institutions would be publicly affirming the parental roles of these students. If the U.S. federal government were to integrate long-term educational plans into social welfare policies and allow students to use their hours towards bachelor’s or graduate degrees as “work participation” hours, qualifying them for

cash, food stamps, and child care assistance, it would be affirming the student roles of these parents. If the U.S. federal government were to reinvest in the Child Care Access Means Parents in School Program, which provides funds to colleges and universities to support child care for student parents, it would be affirming both the student and parental roles of these students. Although the CCAMPIS program was lauded when first implemented in 1998, funding for the program has remained stagnant since 2003, thereby not keeping up with inflation nor campus child care needs (U.S. Department of Education).

In arguing in support of such changes, we must begin by acknowledging the consequences of denying institutionally-based services to students and parents in need. First, in not offering such resources, we devalue at least one of two salient roles in these student parents' lives and force them to make decisions that may negatively challenge their fundamental sense of self. The effects of such devaluations are clearly revealed when Cynthia admits to not being able to reconcile her feminist and mothering identities in large part because of her precarious financial and social situation. Second, we also leave it to individuals in social welfare offices and on college campuses to work with student parents to resolve these contradictory tensions when they emerge, which over the long run too often produces inconsistent, localized solutions. Leaving such a job to individuals is problematic on many levels—within the social welfare office, for example, case managers who are supportive of a college student like Dave must restrain themselves from providing access to many social services or risk violating written policies thereby putting their own position at risk. On a college campus, individual faculty or staff members often do not have the knowledge or resources to aid student parents in locating regular childcare or dealing with last minute family emergencies. Although Dave's coach was an admirable sponsor and deserves a great deal of credit for keeping Dave in school, he was working in isolation and happened to have access to a number of resources that would aid Dave as a student and parent.

Ultimately, support for student parents needs to be provided at the institutional level—it must be encoded in policy, as well as reflected in resources and organizational protocols. For normative ideologies and culture to change in ways that empower student parents, these social service and educational institutions must adapt to the evolving needs of this emerging demographic. Perhaps most frustrating for these student parents is that they are presented too frequently with what they perceive to be unnecessary false choices. That is, they can easily envision a world in which their student and parent roles complement each other when not bound by restrictive organizational policies and procedures. They describe how they are motivated by their children to do well in school and how their children benefit because they can role model positive student behaviors. As such, many of these student parents do not see

their student and parent roles as conflicting but as harmonious. From their experiences and recommendations, we gain insight into how to move forward in creating institutional change that promotes academic success and inclusivity, all while communicating symbolically an institution's commitment to supporting student parents in being both good students *and* good parents.

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