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The Struggles of the Single Parent College Student

Hannah David

Writing an Argument Essay about the ability for single parents to be successful college students is personal to me. I am a single mother and college senior.

Because I am a nontraditional student I have faced several hardships that most traditional students will never experience. I understand why many single parents aspire to earn a college degree. Although the challenge of providing a stable home for our children intensifies this particular goal it is the boundless opportunity, satisfaction and pride that accompany earning a college degree that makes every challenge worthwhile.

I come from a background of successful college graduates. In my immediate family, there are pilots, lawyers, judges, psychologists, nurses, educators, and other prestigious professionals. Pursuing secondary education is expected in my family, but continuing my education was not the path I chose after high school. Instead I chose to pursue a career in performing arts, which turned out to be a successful and lucrative decision for me. I enjoyed performing tremendously, and still do. However, after I became a mother I realized that I still wanted to fulfill my childhood dream of becoming an attorney. I knew that I needed to earn my undergraduate degree in order to attend law school, so by the next fall my four-year-old daughter and I relocated to the Midwest where I was enrolled in a private university.

I didn't realize how difficult managing family, finances and schoolwork would be, but I knew that if I focused on my daughter's well being, and dedicated myself to my goals, I would succeed. My first semester was relatively stress-free because classes were not yet demanding, but everything thereafter completely tested my patience and endurance. Furthermore, I quickly learned that my acceptance as a single parent, in a fundamental Southern Baptist Christian University, would prove to be an insurmountable obstacle

for traditional students. I wasn't worried about the way my peers treated me, but how it would affect my daughter's life has always been my primary concern.

I began my college education very concerned about how my daughter would adjust to living in a university environment. I wanted her to feel accepted and comfortable, so I was particularly sensitive to how the student body and faculty members received her. Because I wasn't well received I refused to accept anything less than their utmost respect and appreciation for my daughter. I needed to ensure that this process would not be injurious to her personal development and interaction with the world.

Single parent students should not be treated with hostility by traditional students (especially in religious universities). This behavior is harmful to nontraditional students and their families, and it affects their ability to earn a degree just as much as financial challenges do.

Sara Goldrick-Rab and Kia Sorenson, authors of "Unmarried Parents in College" and researchers on the financial challenges of single parents in college, offer an objective look into this world that seems easily bypassed by traditional college students. They demonstrate the low completion rate of unmarried college students and those who chose community college over "for-profit" schools because of the cost of attendance.

Although I understand why many nontraditional students choose to earn an associate's certificate rather than pursuing a bachelor's degree, I do not believe that it is the better educational decision. There are many nontraditional students who attend community college because the programs are shorter, less expensive, and may be less vigorous. The outcome can also be less satisfying.

Having an associate's degree is not as substantial for the welfare of a family as having a bachelor's degree because most professional employment requires at least a full undergraduate degree for consideration. The dedication required to fulfill a four-year program is, most often, more notable to an employer because it shows dedication to hard work as well as an ability to commit.

The problem with an Associate's degree is that in the workforce, you'll be competing with other applicants who have Bachelor's degrees. Most people who hold Associate's degrees are interested in white-collar jobs

in science and technology, business, government, or some other office or professional setting—the same jobs Bachelor’s degree holders apply for. When recruiters receive hundreds of resumes for each job posting, it’s easy to use education level as a way to shrink the field—and you may find your resume discarded without serious consideration. Many of these jobs don’t consider applicants with less than a Bachelor’s degree at all, no matter how good your resume looks... One benefit of the Associate’s degree is that it is easy to use to get a Bachelor’s degree (“The Associates Degrees..”).

The above excerpt from the article titled “The Associates Degrees: Pros and Cons” written by “The Online Degree Center” reaffirms my position; having an Associate’s certificate will not be as beneficial to a student when entering the workforce, because it is not as substantial. Each year, over 500 thousand prospective college students (USCensus.gov) who struggle with choosing a post-secondary institution, use the Online Degree Program. Based on the pros and cons regarding certificates, earning a bachelor’s degree should be the obvious choice.

Community college is an option for nontraditional students who want to avoid the costs associated with private institutions. However, with investigation regarding grants, scholarships and low-rate loans the cost to attend a “for-profit” university can be dramatically reduced.

With abundant financial resources available for single-parent students, financial burdens should not be an impediment when choosing an educational institution.

Kim Jeounghee, author of “Welfare Reform and College Enrollment Among Single Mothers” explains that the federal government (during the present Obama administration) has allocated billions of dollars for single parents who are pursuing their education. Although the increase of federal funding to the Pell Grant and other financial aid programs is mainly directed toward community and state schools (where associates degree programs are encouraged with bias), these institutions offer both associate and bachelor degree programs. The above article restates my view that it is not necessary for a nontraditional student to choose his or her degree program based on financial aid availability. The federal

government has made financial aid available for all undergraduate program applicants, specifically returning single parent students.

As I have addressed the struggles faced with financial aid assistance and how it affects nontraditional students, peer acceptance is also important.

Joan Demeules and Beth Hamer are authors of “Retaining Young Student Parents: A Growing Challenge,” and members of St. Catherine’s University’s Steps To Success Program for single parent students. Both women describe the financial challenges that single parent college students face, but more specifically their lack of life experience, due to age (usually ages 18-22), that becomes a barrier for them. Because of their youth, navigating through financial obstacles can be particularly overwhelming, and even debilitating at times. The St. Catherine’s University Steps to Success program assists nontraditional students with childcare, finance and counseling to maintain their enrollment.

Additional aid can be beneficial to students, but having too many special, and specified programs can hinder nontraditional students, rather than increase their probability of success. Sometimes when select individuals (i.e. single parents, persons with disabilities, athletes, the academically challenged, etc.) are given special accommodations, that aren’t assumed by the masses, it can magnify an already negative spotlight. Resentment and exclusion from peers who do not receive accommodations should be expected. Receiving supplementary aid can create conflict within a student body. Furthermore, it does not reflect how the outside world operates, which can be a disservice for students in the long-term.

Offering programs for students with unique circumstances can be beneficial for those who require them in order to stay enrolled, and it increases the appeal of the school, but students can also take advantage of the programs offered. This type of manipulation is expressly magnified in the eyes of resentful peers who can make the college experience, and the resolve of nontraditional students, far less attractive (Van Stone, Nelson, Niemann).

I have accepted financial aid -which most students receive, but I choose not to utilize specialized school programs, such as Disability Services. Being a single parent at a religious university has already provoked students to act adversely toward me, and I don’t want to attract any more attention.

Disability Services, similar to the Steps to Success program at St. Catherine's University, is made available to both nontraditional students with children and traditional students who have unusual circumstances (i.e. mental and health challenges, temporary and permanent physical requirements, family service needs, and counseling needs, etc.). These services have been recommended to me because in addition to having a child I have a chronic illness and other serious health concerns. But, I choose not to utilize these services because I don't need special arrangements and advantages in order to succeed, and I don't want to be comfortable receiving personalized alterations or presume that my future employers will make modifications for me. I expect to be held to the same standard, and meet the same requirements that traditional students must meet.

Being the sole provider and raising a family is a notable challenge for a student, but having a family is neither a detriment nor a disadvantage. Motherhood has been a foremost advantage for me personally, academically and otherwise.

Grants and scholarships rarely satisfy the full burden of school and family expenses, and a student can feel forced to borrow money in order to continue their education and provide for their family. An article from the Hudson Valley Business Journal titled "Single Parents Carry a Debt Burden in For-Profit Colleges Ten Times Higher Than Those in Community College" emphasizes the statistics regarding single parent students with college loans. Additionally, data provided by the Institute For Women's Policy Research (IWPR) indicates how it is so difficult for nontraditional students to manage their financial burdens that it is almost impossible for their debt not to triple.

If nontraditional students are unable to obtain sufficient financial assistance from scholarships and grants, choosing another straightforward alternative, like student loans, is the most obvious option. According to the article "Single Parents Carry a Debt Burden in For-Profit Colleges Ten Times Higher Than Those in Community College" single parents have 10 times more debt after graduating than their childless classmates. The debt parents have one year after graduation is estimated to be 20 to 30 percent higher than traditional students, and three times higher ten years after graduation. If a student interrupts his or her education for over six months, their student loans will no longer be deferred. The monthly

payment for student loans can be negotiated based on a person's circumstances, but repaying a loan can be far more costly to a family if the head of household has not obtained gainful employment as the result of earning their degree.

Clearly this type of debt overload is not easy to avoid for most parent students. Acquiring debt is nearly inescapable for most students to begin with. Providing for a family, while paying for an expensive education, seems impossible to do without going into some debt, but it can be done.

Having debt can be necessary, and the option should not be completely rejected. The best approach for avoiding financial hardship is researching and filling out applications in order to access the billions of dollars available every year for college students in America (specifically minority and nontraditional students).

Operating on a tight budget while providing for a family can be overwhelming and feel demoralizing. Traditional students are only responsible for themselves, which allows their budget to stretch further than nontraditional students who have children. Financial hardship can create a sense of inferiority, which in reality may be self-imposed. However, instead of adopting a dejected position appreciating the many benefits that being a student has on the family will help sustain the fortitude needed to thrive.

College educated parents tend to have more stable homes than non-educated parents. According to Nadine Van Stone, Ron J. Nelson and Joanne Niemann, in their essay "Poor Single Mother College Student's View on the Effects of Some Primary Sociological and Psychological Belief Factors on Their Academic Success"-*Journal of Higher Education*, children whose parents were enrolled in college while parenting, have better communication skills. These children tend to benefit from the experience, rather than suffer because of it, they are more open-minded and tolerant, they tend to be less sexist, and more resourceful, they are more ambitious than other children, and have higher aspirations. These children also tend to be more understanding, less defensive and more likely to ask for help. If attention is focused on family welfare as well as academia, single parent students face a challenge that can be, and is, mutually beneficial to themselves and their children.

With all of the hurdles and barriers that nontraditional parents face, both in and out of school, financial stress and peer acceptance should not be the factors by which they determine their future. The

welfare of their children, and other progressive motivations should drive their perseverance.

While financial constraints, childcare, and academic demands are all overwhelming, the affect that hostile traditional students have on nontraditional students proves to be just as, if not more devastating.

Success is often the central goal for single parent students, but finances, childcare and workloads are not the only reasons they struggle to keep the pace in school. Proving one's academic capabilities can also intensify their willpower.

I have faced hardships more severe than what my college education has presented (so far). The challenges I experience with my peers and professors won't deter my focus as a student. They have been discouraging and disruptive, but my goal of earning a degree remains clear. I have several years more of life experience than most traditional students, which has reminded me not to yield to failure, or the demands of student life. If some of the students I've encountered are capable of earning a college degree I know that I can too.

Sometimes I consider this experience to be a competition between myself and the other students. A competition I am determined to win. Other times, I feel a connection to my classmates because we are all working toward a similar goal. However, irrespective of the "competition" building a strong rapport with my professors ("the referees") is far more important than being accepted by my peers. But, doing this has also been difficult. When I became a member of this student body I assumed my instructors, specifically because of the religious atmosphere, desired to see their pupils succeed. Unfortunately my assumptions were inaccurate, (although there have been exceptions). Nevertheless, I have established methods that encourage me to be an effective parent and student. Because I have persevered, despite the obstacles, my goal of earning an undergraduate degree will soon be achieved, and my dream of becoming an attorney can be realized.

Traditional students (particularly in religious universities) should be considerate to the challenges that nontraditional students face, and make it a priority to be unprejudiced. Although choosing

to persevere is unique to every individual discriminatory behavior by traditional students is injurious to nontraditional students. It burdens their families, and their proclivity to earn a degree, just as much as financial challenges do.

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