**Family Services**

*Introduction*

Cornell must recognize and support the unique challenges that students with family responsibilities face in achieving their coursework, teaching, and research goals. A substantial number of graduate and professional students have children[[1]](#footnote-1). Unfortunately, students are not eligible for many of the benefits available to staff and faculty through Cornell University Human Resources. Given their limited financial resources and substantial demands on their time, there is no doubt that student parents face substantial hardship that can hinder their academic progress.

In the recent Cornell University Strategic Plan[[2]](#footnote-2), the University reaffirmed its commitment to the core principle of Student Access, specifically the goal of a university open and accessible to all who merit entrance. *The support structure for student parents and their partners is an issue of student access*. Graduate and professional students should not feel the need to choose between attending Cornell and raising a family. Addressing the needs of students with family responsibilities furthers the University’s mission of creating a diverse and inclusive student community.

**Objective 1: Improve access to information for students with families**

*Rationale*: The biggest struggles for many graduate and professional student parents are time and money. As student parents new to Cornell or new to parenthood begin to seek out information about raising a family in Ithaca, they often become frustrated and overwhelmed. Students complain that information, both from campus and non-campus resources, is scattered, fragmented and difficult to find. Improved access to information would save student parents valuable time and energy and allow students to make informed decisions for their family. Furthermore, improved access to information would go a long way toward making student parents feel as if they are supported by the University.

Actions:

1. Support a permanent network of staff and administrators who play a role in providing support services to students and their families with the aim of facilitating increased communication across administrative units.
2. Appoint a single individual staff person who serves as a primary contact for student family services and whose responsibilities include communicating with student parents and increasing access to information.
3. Collect improved data on students with families, with the aim of improving usage of and access to existing family services.
4. Maintain an up-to-date and user-friendly website for students parents which provides the following:
   1. A comprehensive informational resource which guides student parents through appropriate actions needed to raise a family in Ithaca and helps student parents navigate available resources.
   2. Accessible explanations of and links to relevant policies, including the graduate parental leave and student health insurance plan (SHIP) policies.
   3. Information about child care options and the student Child Care Grant Program.
   4. Information about the local and state assistance programs for which many graduate students are likely to be eligible.
   5. A forum or discussion board which students can use to post and answer questions, as well as facilitate the creation of a support network for students and their families.
5. Coordinate campus resources including staff, printed information, and websites with community family services from Tompkins County programs and local child care centers.

**Objective 2: Continue to improve access to affordable child care options for students**

*Rationale*: Access to child care is a major concern for many parents. As the 2007 GCI noted, child care expenses can be particularly prohibitive for student parents, and yet time away from coursework, research and teaching commitments hinders academic progress. The cost of childcare at Cornell’s Bright Horizon’s Childcare Center, which is conveniently located on campus, is far outside of the budget for the majority of graduate & professional students. The 2007 GCI recommended instituting a sliding scale for child care service payments and ensuring that relevant grants keep pace with expenses. However, the only financial assistance currently available to cover child care expenses is the student Child Care Grant Program. In the 2012-13 school year, students could apply for a maximum taxable grant subsidy of $1,893 per child, whereas staff and faculty were eligible for a child care tax-free subsidy grant of up to $5,000. Given the current fee structure at Bright Horizons, the maximum student child care grant subsidy only covers 1.3 months of full-time child care[[3]](#footnote-3). Thus, graduate and professional students have little choice but to seek out alternative child care options, which are often significantly less convenient. It should be noted that child care far away from the mother’s place of work places a particular burden on nursing mothers, since it is recommended that they be able to breastfeed several times a day. Thus, there continues to be substantial demand for high-quality, affordable and convenient child care options for student parents.

Actions:

1. Improve access to high-quality child care options that are both affordable and convenient.
   1. Cornell Bright Horizons Childcare Center should revisit the fee structure, with an eye towards affordability and access for graduate & professional students.
2. Continue to support and expand the student Child Care Grant Program.
3. Implement and advertise a rolling or monthly deadline for child care grant applications.

**Objective 3: Foster a supportive campus climate for graduate and professional students with families**

*Rationale*: A myriad of factors contribute to creating a culture that is welcoming to students with children and their partners. Currently, students with families and their partners indicate that they ‘feel invisible’ to the University, despite their relatively large numbers. The 2007 GCI called for the formalization of a university-wide policy on family leave for graduate students. In response, a graduate parental leave policy was instituted in 2008 and updated in Nov. 2011[[4]](#footnote-4). However, there continues to be variation across departments, staff and faculty members in both awareness of the policy and how to appropriately accommodate student parents. In general, there are several areas where improvements could be made to support the particular needs of student parents, and further the creation of an inclusive and family-friendly institutional culture.

Actions:

1. Increase general awareness of the needs of student parents and foster a supportive and inclusive academic environment, in particular:
   1. Encourage explicit discussion of the implementation of graduate parental leave policy within departments, and
   2. Increase awareness surrounding the scheduling needs of student parents, particularly with respect to the scheduling of courses, meetings, and research commitments during the evening.
2. Improve graduate and professional student access to private lactation facilities on campus.
3. Extend to students access to short term mobility permit parking for parents in the late stages of pregnancy and reduced-rate temporary parking permits for breastfeeding mothers who need to leave the campus to breastfeed.
4. Ensure adequate training of health care staff at Gannett to provide helpful information for student parents and students interested in starting a family, particularly with regards to family planning, pregnancy, delivery, and pediatric care.
5. Continue to support the family-friendly on-campus housing community at Hasbrouck Apartments, in particular:
   1. Strengthen support for family-oriented programming, and
   2. Provide free guest parking on site, which would allow the frequent guests who provide critical support to the family community (such as babysitters, visiting parents, social workers, tutors, on-site medical personnel, ESL coaches) to park for free.
6. Create a need-based final-year dissertation writing fellowship for Ph.D. students for whom teaching, family, and financial responsibilities are hindering progress towards successful completion of their dissertation.

**Objective 4: Increase support for and inclusion of student partners and spouses**

*Rationale*: Cornell should recognize that supporting the partners and families of students is supporting students. Financial and emotional struggles put an incredible stress on students and their families, which ultimately affects students’ abilities to achieve their academic and research goals. Student partners often perform a substantial portion of child care and domestic responsibilities. However, the unfortunate reality is that student partners often experience incredible stress and isolation as their partners pursue a degree at Cornell. Student partners report experiencing emotional distress, stemming from a lack of support, a sense of isolation, a loss of identity, and significant financial worries. This can be especially true for international student partners, who experience additional cultural, legal, and language barriers to meaningfully integrating into the local community.

Actions:

1. Identify ways to increase inclusion of student partners in the campus community, such as extending invitations to participate in on-campus events to student partners and their children, reduced-rate access to Extramural Study programs for student partners, and continued access to Spouse ID cards.
2. Explicitly include student partners in orientation events.
3. Continue to support programming and initiatives that allow student parents and their partners to find local support networks.
4. Increase access to mental health resources for student partners, including individual and relationship counseling services.

1. Based on survey of a representative sample of students, approximately 10% of graduate and professional students have at least one child. [GPSA Comprehensive Report on the 2011 Student Activity Fee-Funded Services Consumption Patterns Survey](http://www.cornellgpsa.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/GPSA-Ad-hoc-Survey-Ctte-Final-Report.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [Cornell University at its Sesquicentennial: A Strategic Plan 2010-2015](http://www.cornell.edu/strategicplan/docs/060410-strategic-plan-final.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Information on Bright Horizons rates as of August 2012: <https://www.hr.cornell.edu/life/support/c4_rates.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [University Policy 1.6, Graduate and Professional Student Parental Accommodation](http://www.dfa.cornell.edu/cms/treasurer/policyoffice/policies/volumes/academic/upload/vol1_6.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)