

On diapers and differential equations - the challenges of combining higher education and parenthood

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Introduction

Higher education is traditionally pursued during the earlier twenties, in Sweden as well as internationally. Some students however, decide to do things in a slightly less common order and start a family before enrolling in university studies. This paper will attempt to give an overview of the differences between traditional students and students combining parenthood and studies as well as discuss the necessity and benefits of attracting such students to higher education.

Previous international studies

In Sweden, the number of students receiving extra support from the Swedish Board of Student Finance for having children amounts to around 80 000 persons, which should be considered a lower threshold since some students combine work and studies thus not being eligible for student loans. While these students may not struggle to get up in time for lectures or wonder if the pasta or the water goes first¹, they face other challenges in their daily lives and may require different kinds of support from faculty as well as family to maximize the chances of persisting to the point of obtaining a degree.

Differences perceived by students

Dill and Henley (1998) studied how different types of events affected the perceived stress of traditional and non-traditional US students, i.e. students with a break between high-school and college as well as having responsibilities apart from the studies such as parenthood or employment. The authors found several differences between the two groups. Amongst others, the non-traditional students felt less anxiety over not performing well enough and also enjoyed attending class to a greater extent than the traditional students, albeit attending class to a lesser degree than their traditional counterparts. It is speculated that this may be an indication being able to attain satisfaction from multiple roles and I would personally agree that there is a certain satisfaction to be had when one is able to pick the kids up earlier than planned from kindergarten after passing an exam.

Dill and Henley went on to discuss the dissimilarities in the types of social networking between the groups, that traditional students spent more time on and were more affected by the interaction with their peers. The parents' expectations to show results were also reported to be a greater source of stress for the traditional than the non-traditional students, something that is not seen as surprising as the parents of the surveyed students would normally be the ones paying for the education. These findings could be seen as further proof that the non traditional students have more sources from which they may gain satisfaction all the while having less time for each individual source.

Although the above findings were documented some 20 years ago, later research summarized by Brinhaupt and Eady (2014) in their article on faculty members' attitudes largely seem to agree with Dill and Henley.

Differences perceived by teachers

Brinhaupt and Eady's research (2014) takes a look at the opposite side of things and survey how teachers and staff act towards non-traditional students and specifically how these interactions differed from interactions with traditional students, ie students below the age of 25. It was found that teachers generally

¹True story, question asked during general discussion in my first year at University

appreciate the mix of student ages and perceive few, if any, negative effects of having older students in class. An interesting note is that the adult learners were seen as more grade conscious by the teachers. This goes somewhat against the findings of Dill and Henley (1998) that non-traditional students were less stressed by performance expectations, but can also be interpreted as supporting the non-traditional students ability to gather positives from multiple sources.

The teachers surveyed by Brinhaupt and Eady had generally not made any special arrangements for their older students, nor felt any need to do so. Those teachers who had made arrangements reported a more positive attitude to older students and also a greater interest in learning more on how these students function. On a less positive note it should be mentioned that special arrangements could include adaptations geared towards capitalizing on the special experience that older students may possess, thus potentially missing out on adding value to all students. Avoiding classroom adaptations may also be the results of not wanting to risk discrimination on any part of the student body. It should also be stressed that the definitions of non-traditional students differ between the two studies mentioned so far.

The institutions' role in assuring student success

Mark Fincher (2010) widens the net and discuss how the universities as a whole can work for the benefit of older age students. He proposed the use of something called *Learning Enhancement* revolving around the idea that the pace of the learning process should be increased and presented a number of keys to making this a viable method in ensuring for retaining students. The method should not be confused with simply shortening the time of the education while retaining the same curriculum, but rather making the learning happen in a shorter amount of time. Among other things Fincher mentioned the need to ensure that knowledge deficiencies are handled and resolved rather than the student simply skipping parts of the education. This coupled with a more individual attention to academic performance will of course benefit most student, but older students with more diverse backgrounds may experience the greatest benefits. Other key elements in ensuring the likelihood of retaining an adult student included adaptations to the administrative elements of the institutions including synchronization of tuition payments and course schedule to make sure that the need for a course coincides with the possibility to finance it.

Institutional encouragement was also brought forward as a key factor of adult student success in a study by Bergman et al (2014) fittingly titled "If Life Happened but a Degree Didn't". Although the logistic model used in the study didn't achieve significance on all the variables concerned with campus environment, the authors point out that controlling for these variables greatly increased the amount of variation in student persistence accounted for. The study also concludes that the support from close family and financial factors are important when ensuring that older students finish their education.

Swedish research

While the amount of research focusing on Swedish students with multiple responsibilities are naturally fewer, one paper by Hallberg et al. (2011) made on behalf of the Institute of Labour Market Policy Evaluation studied students that are also parents. This study discussed the effect on higher studies that nowadays stretch into the age where family was previously normally formed. The increased lifespan and expected years in work leads to a longer period from which the costs of education can be repaid while enabling people to enter higher studies after becoming parents can decrease medical costs for society compared to delaying the children until after university studies. All in all it may be beneficial for all of society to ensuring that the non-traditional student is a viable option to its citizens.

Hallberg's study focused among others on whether there are differences in study pace and student attrition between students that are parents and traditional students. It was noted in several places that care should be taken when interpreting the models used as causal relationships since the subset of people that manage to graduate while being parents are likely special in more ways than just being parents, among other factors it was noted that female students made up over 70 percent of studying parents while their share among non-parents was only around 55 percent.

The study found that students with kids seemed to take slightly less time to graduate, but this is largely caused by those students who became parents during their studies and not those that entered studies already being parents. It was speculated that this may be caused by the financial uncertainty caused by

having an unfinished degree, pushing students to speed up their studies once they became parents. Parents also seem to take less extracurricular courses than traditional students and have a higher likelihood of graduating, results that controlled for various background variables.

Hallberg and associates finally discussed the possibility that they were in fact dealing with two separate groups of students that combine studies with parenthood; one group that enter studies intent on actually graduating and another that see higher education as an alternative to unemployment. The generous swedish social security system is also suspected of playing a roll and enabling people to getting an income that the parental leave insurance is based on and only thereafter entering studies, effectively entering the labour market in a delayed manner.

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