Programs and Services to Support Single Mothers In Graduating with a Postsecondary Education: A Delphi Study

Dawnetta Smith
University of Texas at Arlington

Abstract

Being a single mother can be difficult, especially when a single mother has little or no income. Nationally, over 43% of households headed by single women with children live in poverty and over 56.7% of poor children lived with single mothers. (Hess et al., 2015; National Women’s Law Center, 2015). In Texas, 41.8% of female-headed households live in poverty (National Women’s Law Center, 2015). With these startling statistics, most federal and state programs only provide temporary assistance and do not help single mothers escape poverty long-term (Single Mother Guide, 2016).

Nationally, an average weekly wage for women with a high school diploma is $578, while women with an associate’s degree earn $661 weekly, and women with a bachelor’s degree or higher average $1049 weekly (United States Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). However, roughly 18% of low-income single mothers do not have a high school diploma (Covert, 2014). Therefore, many of these women rely on government assistance to care for themselves and their children. Low-income single mothers have a desire to earn a living for their families, but a lack of credentials forces them to work low-wage jobs (DeBell, Yi, & Hartman, 1997). It is known that higher education can provide those in poverty an escape, this includes
low-income single mothers (Graham & Bassett, 2011).

Institutions of higher education are serving an increasing number of single mothers today, with 43% of parenting students being single mothers (Gault, Reichlin, Reynolds, & Froehner, 2014). However, just over 27% of single mothers complete a degree or certificate within six years of enrollment (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). With this growing population, it is important that higher education institutions examine the multiple barriers low-income single mothers face and collaboratively strive to help alleviate some of those barriers (Tiamiyu & Mitchell, 2001).

There is limited research on effective programs and services that support low-income single mothers through postsecondary education attainment. Higher education institutions are continually working to retain and graduate more students. With the average completion rate of 29% for 2-year institutions and 59% for 4-year institutions many students enter college and leave with little more than debt (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015; Texas Women’s Foundation, 2014). The problem in the current study is the lack or limited availability of programs and services on college and university campuses for low-income single mothers to successfully complete a higher education. As higher education institutions continue to strive to increase retention and graduation rates, it is important that single mothers are considered in the programs and services that are offered at institutions (Graham & Bassett, 2012). Improvements in programs and services for single mothers can help these mothers continue and complete a postsecondary education (Graham & Bassett, 2012).

In looking to increase the understanding and research around single mothers pursuing a higher education, the current study utilized a Delphi method to gather experts’ opinions about
programs and services that are needed to support single mothers pursuing a degree in higher education. The current study invited 50 experts, professionals who have worked with single mothers pursuing a higher education for at least 24 months and single mothers who are currently pursuing or who recently completed a credential in higher education in the last 24 months, to provide their opinion about the current study topic. This was accomplished through a five-round Delphi study. The final results of the current study provided a ranking order for the categories of programs and services and also a top five selection of programs and services needed by single mothers to complete a degree in higher education. This information was utilized to build an evaluative scorecard for higher education institutions to review their programs and services for single mothers attending their campuses. Table 1, displays the final results of the Delphi Study.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranking Order of Categories of Programs and Services</th>
<th>1. Institutional Programs and Services</th>
<th>2. Social Services</th>
<th>3. Academic Programs and Services</th>
<th>4. Family Support Programs and Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The need for research of this caliber is essential as by the year 2020, 65% of all jobs in the U.S. will require some form of postsecondary education (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013). Current research shows that for many students having access to tutoring, mentoring, academic and career advising, TRIO programs as well as other services helps to ensure a holistic learning environment (Hayes-Nelson, 2009). While these programs are important, many of the
participants in the current study felt that these programs were no different than services most other students need. The current study found that low-income single mothers need more specific services such as, class times available for working single mothers and child-friendly on campus study spaces. The current study also expanded beyond just social services for the mothers and Dr. Smith included academic, family supports, and institutional programs and services that are needed by single mothers.

In conclusion, the current study was timely due to the focus of previous President Barak Obama and Congress to increase graduation rates among college students (The White House, n.d.). It is important that single mothers be considered in this as they comprise 43% of the parenting student population on higher education campuses (Gault, et al., 2014). Moreover, the current study is important to ensure that low-income single mothers obtain the credentials of a degree or certification that can help low-income single mothers earn a living wage (DeBell, Yi, & Hartman, 1997). Not only will an increase in wages help low-income single mothers and their families escape poverty, but also earning a credential will help the single mothers have higher self-esteem, be stronger leaders in their families and communities, influence their children’s educational goals, and positively change the dynamic of the family and demonstrate to their children that with hard work and dedication anything is possible (Graham & Bassett, 2011; McMahon, 2009; Miller, Gault, & Thorman, 2011; Tiamiyu & Mitchell, 2001). The results of the study can be used to increase retention rates of single mothers while also providing information for increasing retention rates for all students, especially disadvantaged students.
References


Graham, M., & Bassett, M. (2012). Low-income single mothers at community college:


