

Perception is Reality

When pregnant and parenting students can't find campus resources, the message is clear:

“Your college experience here is over.”



perception is reality

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In 1996, a board member of Feminists for Life shared her experience of facing an unplanned pregnancy while in college. “Without housing, day care and maternity coverage, it doesn’t feel like you have much of a free choice,” she told the board.

In the course of a decade of hosting groundbreaking FFL Pregnancy Resource Forums at top colleges across the country, Feminists for Life has seen the same problems over and over: vital resources are missing, policies are not in place, and services that do exist are not communicated to students or even between staff in different departments.

Are these widespread problems for pregnant and parenting students at colleges and universities across the country? Is the lack of resources “only in her mind”—a misperception by students who are in crisis and overwhelmed?

Or are pregnant and parenting students “missing on campus” because resources are nowhere to be found?

In November 2007, Feminists for Life and Students for Life of America asked 400 pro-life student leaders to put themselves in the shoes of a pregnant or parenting student. Could these activists—who were not feeling the shock of facing an unplanned pregnancy, whose predisposition was to find help for a woman considering abortion and to support parenting students—find the basic resources needed for a pregnant woman to have her baby and continue her education, and for a parenting student to get that all-important degree?

Who chose to walk in her shoes?

Out of 400 campuses with pro-life student groups, 165 respondents from 117 different colleges and universities took on the challenge and completed FFL’s Pregnancy Resources Survey.

85% percent of the student respondents were undergraduates.

8% were graduate students.

3% were alumni.

Fewer than 1% of the respondents were faculty members.

The majority of schools represented were state schools (58%), with equal representation of private and religious colleges (21% each).

The goal of Feminists for Life’s first-ever nationwide Pregnancy Resources Survey was to determine students’ perceptions about the availability on their campuses of resources and support for pregnant and parenting students.

According to FFL’s Survey, respondents were often able to find information about housing, and most of them indicated that housing was unavailable for these students.

Many were confused about the scope of childcare options. The overwhelming perception of respondents was that faculty members and staff have priority access to on-campus childcare. Undergraduates and foreign students were believed to be the least served.

Most respondents were unaware of policies regarding financial aid, healthcare, and education about resources and support. Financial aid and healthcare are among the most complex and demanding components of student life—even more so for pregnant and parenting students. The fact that many respondents did not even know how to find information on healthcare and financial aid suggests a serious gap in the way college administrations educate students about their most basic resources.

Responses in the financial aid section suggest that students have not been educated about the range of options available to pregnant and parenting students to secure federal financial aid for housing, tuition, and childcare costs.

Additionally, students are woefully uneducated about paternity establishment and the rights and responsibilities of fathers. Both of these elements are crucial for establishing the financial security of a pregnant or parenting student.

Some campuses offer information on pregnancy resources via posters and brochures, but many survey respondents had not seen these materials. When primary sources like first-year orientation, student handbooks, and even RAs (resident assistants or residential advisors) are lacking or perceived to be lacking in information, pregnant and parenting students have nowhere to turn for answers.

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There is also a demonstrated need for resources to be available in more than one visible place on campus—that is, the school website, handbooks and RA training materials, as well as widely disseminated printed materials (posters, brochures, etc.).

A number of colleges and universities have some on-campus resources, and others are taking steps to create a supportive academic environment for pregnant and parenting students. Flexible class scheduling is far and away the best-known resource for pregnant and parenting students. This resource is useful to traditional and parenting students alike, and most respondents indicated that online, evening, or weekend courses are available on their campuses.

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The responses to FFL's Survey reveal hard truths about the situation for pregnant and parenting students on campus: either there is a genuine lack of resources on campus, or there is ignorance about existing resources—even among student activists who are most vested in supporting services for pregnant and parenting students.

Whether it is a lack of resources or ignorance, the result is the same from students' perspectives. Pregnant and parenting students do not see themselves as welcomed or supported on most college campuses.

These survey findings point to the vital importance of Feminists for Life's efforts to help administrators establish policies that support pregnant and parenting students and staff, develop and communicate on-campus resources—and educate students about the supports already in place.

One key to educating students is providing a clear source of information. The confused responses about where to find information point to the need for a well-publicized central office or staff person to handle queries about pregnancy and parenting on campus. Feminists for Life has advocated such an innovation in the development of the Elizabeth Cady Stanton Pregnant and Parenting Student Services Act. If passed, this legislation would establish a pilot program to

provide grants to encourage institutions of higher education to establish and operate a pregnant and parenting student services office. The on-campus office would serve parenting students, prospective student parents who are pregnant or imminently anticipating an adoption, and students who are placing or have placed a child for adoption.

THEY SAY I HAVE A



FREE
CHOICE

But without housing on campus for me and my baby, without on-site day care, without maternity coverage in my health insurance, it sure doesn't feel like I have much of a choice.

The stakes are high. The Guttmacher Institute reports that half of all abortions are performed on college-age women. Lack of resources and support is the root cause that drives women to abortion.

Lack of resources and support also drives many parenting students to abort their education and career plans. *With little or no college education, parents face reduced employment prospects—even poverty.*

Pregnant and parenting students deserve better. They deserve equal access to opportunities in higher education. And society deserves to benefit from the unique contributions that their education will allow them to make.

Feminists for Life believes that colleges and universities should not only mirror the advancements for women and parents that we have seen in recent years in the workplace, they should be models for resources and support.

Pro-woman activists are beginning to rally for long-overdue on-campus resources—and push colleges and universities to provide leadership in supporting women and parents as valued members of our communities. *