

## **Parenting students: The ‘invisible’ population on campus**

More than one in five American college students are also parents. They struggle to find belonging, flexibility and resources in higher education. But they are not giving up.

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Robin Chenoweth: Jayda Jackson was a first-generation student, the one everyone back home said would go to college. She was on scholarship in her first semester at Penn State when she got the news that changed everything.

Jayda Jackson: About a month into college, I found out that I was pregnant by my high school sweetheart. And I decided to go home to have a healthy pregnancy. Because there's no way I was going to be an honors college student and juggle pregnancy at the same time.

Robin Chenoweth: She felt she had let everyone down — her classmates, her family, her community. But she was determined not to let herself down and especially determined to make a life for her new son.

Jayda Jackson: I knew that I was still going to follow my dreams, and that I would still make it happen.

Robin Chenoweth: Jackson, now a senior in chemical engineering at Ohio State, is among the hidden — underserved college students with children who largely fly under the radar on American campuses.

Traci Lewis: I call them the invisible population, because people will see them as students, but they don't see them as parents, which is why instead of calling them student parents, I call them parenting students, because they're parents first.

Robin Chenoweth: Traci Lewis directs Ohio State University's ACCESS Collaborative, which since 1989 has assisted parenting students at Ohio State.

Traci Lewis: Nobody wants to be stared at because you're pushing a stroller across campus. Nobody wants to be made to feel bad because their child is sick, or the daycare is closed, about missing class, or being penalized for missing class because their child was sick. They don't want to even tell faculty that they have children, because they don't want them to think that they're going to use their child as an excuse.

Robin Chenoweth: If you work in higher education, or attend college, parenting students are in your classes, your advising office, your cohort — even if you don't realize it. Lewis, and Associate Professor Kelly Purtell from Education and Human Ecology, are working hard to make sure that you do realize it: Parenting students are part of the campus community. And, yes, being in college is especially challenging for them, but if they're given support, they don't just beat the odds. They prosper. This is the Ohio State

University Inspire Podcast, a production of the College of Education and Human Ecology. I'm Robin Chenoweth. Carol Delgrosso is our audio engineer. Kyle Bucklew is our student intern.

Robin Chenoweth: Kelly Purtell began in 2019 evaluating a federal program that gives childcare subsidies to Pell Grant-eligible students, called CCAMPIS. The Office of Diversity and Inclusion had received the grant the year before. She quickly discovered some surprising truths about college-going parents.

Kelly Purtell: The most recent national statistics, show that 4 million undergrad students are also parents, and that this constitutes about 22% of all undergrad students overall. So it's a really big part of our college-going population.

Robin Chenoweth: That's kind of shocking, actually.

Kelly Purtell: It's very shocking. Most people don't recognize that there are so many student parents attending our universities across the country. The most common place where student parents are is community colleges. But there's also a large portion of student parents at public and private universities that offer four-year degrees as well.

Robin Chenoweth: How many are at Ohio State? Because admissions applications and university-wide surveys don't ask, we don't really know. While some 400 Ohio State student parents were Pell-eligible in 2021, that number doesn't include international students, graduate students or students who don't submit the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA. Traci Lewis.

Traci Lewis: We're only capturing some of them because we're looking at FAFSA, but we know there is a whole lot more.

Robin Chenoweth: But we do know the number of Pell-eligible parenting students fell 17% last year, and 29% since 2016. So, at Ohio State, fewer parenting students are being accepted or applying in the first place. And fewer are matriculating from community colleges.

Traci Lewis: You have students who may want to come to Ohio State, but they can't, because they have a child. And there's nowhere for them on campus to live with their child. Off-campus housing is not where I would want to be with my child. So, then they have to move farther away. Or, we've had students that have come and, and have either found out they were pregnant once they got here, or they got pregnant while they got here. And then they have to move out of the dorm.

Robin Chenoweth: There are lots of other reasons parents decide not to become students. Kelly Purtell.

Kelly Purtell: The challenges that parenting students face run the gamut from really structural financial challenges through psychological and social well-being. In both our

local data and national data, we find that most the majority of student parents are working. So, they're balancing raising their children, going to classes, getting their coursework done, studying for exams and trying to bring income in to support their household. There's just a real big time-crunch in terms of how do they get through everything they need to get through every day.

Robin Chenoweth: Alumna Jillian Deas had her son as an undergrad in 2017, after transferring from the Ohio State's College of Engineering into the College of Education and Human Ecology. She was studying to become a math and science teacher.

Jillian Deas: It's not just us going to class learning, passing tests and graduating. We're doing all of that, as well as taking care of these little people, trying to make them be the best they could be. Also taking care of our mental sanity, and probably balancing financial struggles.

Robin Chenoweth: A typical day for Deas and her son, Jahlil, when she was an undergrad? Up at 7, get breakfast, get her son to daycare by 8.

Jillian Deas: Hopping on the CABS bus across the street, about 30 to 45 minutes. It's always having to plan because you never know if the bus is going to come late or be full or what might happen.

Robin Chenoweth: Class at 9, followed by a break

Jillian Deas: Get lunch, and find a study spot and try to camp out and do some work. Typically, I fell asleep because I was tired. But I attempted.

Robin Chenoweth: Then class from 2 to 4, then again from 4:30 to 6:45.

Jillian Deas: By then I would try to grab food on the way back to the CABS pickup. So, I might go to Scott's Cafe, grab their to-go meals.

Robin Chenoweth: Two of them? One for you and one for your son?

Jillian Deas: Yep, I would grab two of them. And then get to the bus, get to the car, go across the street, pick him up from daycare.

Robin Chenoweth: She was lucky. Jahlil's center at Ohio State provides care until midnight, one of the only facilities in the city that does.

Jillian Deas: By this point, he's now been in daycare for 12 hours. So, it's eight o'clock almost. We're going to run home, eat, get cleaned up, and now it's pretty much straight to bed for him. So, by that point, I'm so drained, I have just enough energy to nurse him. And we simply fall asleep together. And then I wake up the next morning and try to do it again. Try to fit in whatever I didn't do the night before, and power through till the weekend until, you know, you can hopefully make up some time.

Robin Chenoweth: Deas' parents both had passed away by the time she was 17. There was no family to ask for help. The same was true Jayda Jackson, who, after earning an associate's degree at a Bowling Green State University regional campus, moved with her son to Columbus, to pursue a bachelor's in chemical engineering. Now, she was more than two hours from her family.

Jayda Jackson: I was accepted into this program. And so to other people it might sound scary. "Wow, you just moved two and a half hours away with no family and a kid and began college." And for me, it was an opportunity that didn't even seem realistic. Moving away two hours was like the least bit of my worries. I was so happy and so grateful to have this opportunity that nothing else mattered.

Robin Chenoweth: Deas and Jackson, with help from the ACCESS Collaborative, both received federal child care vouchers, as well as CCAMPIS subsidies that pay \$2,500 per semester toward their children's care. Stephanie Fields oversees Ohio State's CCAMPIS grant.

Stephanie Fields: A child care payment can run a typical person, working individual or working family, close to \$1,500 per month. So, we can imagine how that might be pretty steep for a family who may not be working or attending school, both parents attending school or a single parent. So that's why it's so valuable for students, especially at OSU, to utilize that resource.

Robin Chenoweth: Kelly Purtell.

Kelly Purtell: We know there's a shortage of child care availability nationwide. We know that that's gotten worse during the pandemic. And it's particularly bad around colleges where students, staff and faculty all want to have their children in the programs that are either on campus or really close to campus. And, so, it becomes incredibly hard to get your child in. There are incredibly long wait lists. One of the really nice features of OSU CCAMPIS program is that they intentionally developed partnerships with high quality childcare providers, both on but also off campus.

Robin Chenoweth: But almost no centers provide evening care, and even recently, many closed for days when COVID outbreaks occurred. So parenting students with sick kids or evening meetings for projects often find themselves stuck. Jayda Jackson.

Jayda Jackson: I remember one day I was in class, and I got a phone call from my son's daycare that said my son's fever was so high that I had to come get him. I had a quiz that day. I just have to stop everything that I'm doing and go get my son. And I don't have any family here. I don't have my mom to call and say, "Hey, can you pick up my son? Because I can't." I just have to adjust.

Jayda Jackson: Another thing that I've had to deal with would be scheduling classes. I'm in my senior year, some of my classes, there's only one day and time of the week for

this class. One of my classes are on Mondays from 6:30 to 7:50 every week. My son's daycare closes at 5:45, but I need this class to graduate. So, either that professor has to be understanding that I need to bring my son to class with me or I have to find other ways to make it work.

Stephanie Fields: The workforce of Early Child Care educators is dwindling. So that's why it's almost like a domino effect. If you can't hire the workers at a pretty good salary, you're not going to get workers that will be willing to work the evening hours.

Robin Chenoweth: But parenting students' need for emergency and drop-in care is great, Purtell says.

Kelly Purtell: And that's in part due to their changing schedules week to week. So, in addition to attending classes, there are some weeks where there's a lot of exams and they need extra time to study. Group projects are a big reason for the need for drop-in child care. But also, for some of our student parents, it's changes in their work schedules that are happening week to week. But overall, what we find is having backup plans or additional options for childcare is something that student parents report in our focus groups as something that they need.

Robin Chenoweth: There are money stressors, too. Deas lived in the Columbus Scholar House, a Community Properties of Ohio cooperative that provides housing for student parents from Ohio State and other area colleges. Jackson lives there now. But there are many other expenses. Deas' disbursement check from her scholarships had to last for months.

Jillian Deas: So, you're making \$5,000 stretch for six months.

Robin Chenoweth: And that's buying food, diapers, whatever clothing you need, transportation...

Jillian Deas: Toiletries. Exactly, transportation. I always had a car payment. That's assuming you don't need an oil change that month. All these other factors. And, also, being someone who's going into a professional field where you need specific attire. If I have to go into school, I can't wear my leggings and hoodie that I wear to class. If any of those social services were to fall from under us, like the housing or food stamps or we had Medicaid as well....We are stuck and stranded if we don't have insurance. We are stuck and stranded if we're not able to find food.

Robin Chenoweth: That's when Traci Lewis and the ACCESS Collaborative go to bat for parenting students.

Traci Lewis: Today, I got a text message from a student who says, "I'm having issues with Jobs and Family Services, and they've cut off my SNAP benefits and I don't know why. I can't reach them. I've been on the phone. I've been calling and calling and calling. And I've been on hold for half hour, over an hour, and I'm in class, and I'm trying

to take care of this. And, I've been going to the pantries in the community, but it's not lasting. And my son and I don't have enough money for food.”

Robin Chenoweth: Lewis provided gift cards for groceries and advice for wading through the bureaucratic quagmire of programs that are supposed to help parenting students but can serve as barrier to their success.

Traci Lewis: They don't always have an hour to sit on the phone and wait, or to go down to Jobs and Family Services and sit all day because they've got class. So, it makes it very, very hard. You talk about what their struggles are, some of the challenges. That's a huge challenge.

Robin Chenoweth: Dealing with poverty is not new for most parenting students. Most of them are just doing everything in their power to get out of it. Jayda Jackson.

Jayda Jackson: I grew up with my mom being a single parent of five kids. So, like, I grew up in poverty. I've been poor my whole life. One of the things that I've learned the most growing up, seeking opportunities for myself, was never be afraid to ask for help. And the worst they can say is no.

Robin Chenoweth: Sometimes parenting students feel guilt. About the time they spend studying. About the fact that they could be working a \$15,000-a-year job, which might be easier in the short run.

Jayda Jackson: But I like to tell myself, I don't remember anything from when I was four years old, you know? And we're struggling now. But I'm doing it so I can build a better life and so that he can grow up and have better opportunities.

Robin Chenoweth: Being a parenting student is tough, all on its own. But Kelly Purtell's research has pointed to one issue that should be a no-brainer, except that it means creating a cultural shift.

Kelly Purtell: One of the more unique things that the research that we've been doing has shown is that campus belonging and feeling supported at college is something that parenting students are often struggling with.

Robin Chenoweth: Describe that a little bit. What are they missing?

Kelly Purtell: We found that they pretty consistently report low feelings of campus belonging or feeling connected to others on campus. And we followed that work out by doing more in-depth focus groups with parenting students, and we just hear that there's a lot of barriers that prevent them from really feeling like campus is welcoming and open to them. And some of these things are really logistical. Like, it's really hard for them to bring their children to campus with them because their strollers don't fit on the campus buses, or they don't have enough room on the sidewalks. But it's also that they don't necessarily feel as though campus is open to having their children on campus.

Robin Chenoweth: Jillian Deas.

Jillian Deas: People are much more excited to see dogs on campus than kids.

Robin Chenoweth: You know, I had that thought, too. I think you see a lot of dogs. You don't see a lot of children.

Jillian Deas: No. It's hard to see them. Like, where would you see them? There's not really a space for them. I've seen parents struggle to bring their stroller on the bus because the bus is packed. And no one makes space. I remember being pregnant. And though I prefer to stand, I was never offered a seat on the bus by many people. And this is when I was like eight, nine months pregnant. So it's very clear and obvious that I am very pregnant. It wasn't ever that I got a big, bad luck or anything like that. It's just you could see there was no welcoming feeling, either.

Robin Chenoweth: Kelly Purtell.

Kelly Purtell: We find that parenting students are often not comfortable disclosing with either their classmates or their instructors that they are student parents. For many of the student parents, it is grounded in experiences that they've had that have gone negatively in the past. So, we do hear lots of stories of student parents feeling supported by the instructors that they're interacting with, or the classmates that they're working with on group projects. But we also hear a number of stories where things don't go as well.

Robin Chenoweth: Like when a professor didn't give a student flexibility when her child was sick. Or when a faculty member encouraged a student to bring her son to class after child care fell through, but then joked to the class that she hated babies. That student never brought her son to class again.

Traci Lewis: The culture of how parenting students are accepted on campus does need to be addressed. A lot of student organizations may meet in in the evening. They don't have anybody and they can't pay for a babysitter at night, so they can't participate. So, they end up really not feeling welcome, or comfortable, because they can't really take advantage of the college experience, because it's basically saying, it's not for you because you have a child.

Robin Chenoweth: If higher education is going to live up to its commitment to diversity and inclusion, especially at four-year institutions, it needs to shift, Purtell says, so that parenting students can find belonging.

Kelly Purtell: Really improving the family friendliness of campus. And this is the one that I especially think is a series of small changes, changing the attitudes, increasing awareness, redoing some campus spaces, and finding new ways to create connections for the students at a place as large as Ohio State.

Robin Chenoweth: The shift can happen. The ACCESS Collaborative partnered with Thompson Library to create a Family Zone on the library's first floor where students can bring children. Parenting students report that, within the confines of their cohorts, they are finding acceptance, people who embrace them and their children. And living in the Columbus Scholar House has been invaluable for providing parents access to students like themselves. Jayda Jackson.

Jayda Jackson: It's like a huge family. We have a huge group chat with all the mothers. If anybody ever needs something, they text the group chat. And there's bound to be one person who can help. When new moms come in, they're less experienced, there's always somebody willing to help. And we all have experienced the same circumstances so we're so willing to be that person that somebody needs.

Robin Chenoweth: What's at stake if don't embrace parenting students? Losing out on the complexity and host of perspectives that they bring. Jillian Deas.

Jillian Deas: Parenting students are driven by their passions, because they see who they have to push through and support. So, they're focused on whatever that big goal they want to accomplish. They're going to get there. As long as those basic needs are met, they'll probably be your top tier student, and probably collaborate and offer some really cool insight because their lens is different. The filters that I like to call them in which they're processing information and scenarios through is different compared to your modernly traditional student.

Robin Chenoweth: More than 500 students have graduated through the ACCESS Collaborative Program, including 12 set to graduate this spring. And while dropout rates are high for student parents nationwide, that's not the case for Ohio State's ACCESS Collaborative students.

Robin Chenoweth: I read a statistic somewhere that they tend to have higher GPAs.

Traci Lewis: The average GPA for our students, it ranges between a 3.3 and a 3.5.

Stephanie Fields: Yes.

Traci Lewis: So, they are, they are so on point. They come in; they stay on track. If we can keep them focused on what they need to do, they stay on track, and they're out of here in four years.

Stephanie Fields: Exactly.

Traci Lewis: They're not here 5, 6, 7 years. They're out in four years. And here's the other piece. They're moving on to graduate school. These students, you know, they're not, they're not playing. We have doctors; we have lawyers; we have entrepreneurs; we



have social workers. A lot of them are creating their own businesses and just doing their thing.

Stephanie Fields: They're diligent, they're motivated, they do not take no for an answer. Once you give them some momentum, like they run, they run with it, with their whole heart, so, and their kids are right alongside them. They're dragging their kids, right? Right with them. (Laughs.)

Call to action: *Attend the 2022 Virtual National Student Parent Support Symposium, May 18 and 19. For more information, go to the Ohio State University Office of Diversity and Inclusion website.*

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