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Addressing Issues for Graduate Students who are Single Parents with Dependent Children: What is the Role of Adult Education?

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Keywords: single parents, graduate students, adult education

Abstract: The purpose of this roundtable is to begin unveiling the experience of the graduate student who is also a single parent, while also suggesting supportive programs to improve their recruitment and success. This adult student population is underserved. Understanding their challenges is necessary to improve resources and student success.

Single parents face many unique obstacles, many of them related to the delicate balancing act of childcare and professional or educational obligations. Much has been discovered about the single parent family (McCreary & Dancy, 2004; Usdansky, 2009), especially single mothers in poverty (i.e., Adair, 2010; Cerven, 2013). Some research addresses single parents in adult basic education (Stanfel, 1996) and community college certification programs (Carroll, Kersh, Sullivan, & Fincher, 2012; Gault, Reichlin, & Roman, 2014; Miller, Gault, & Thorman, 2011). Increasingly, research investigates single parents pursuing their first two or four year degree (Cerven, 2013; Lovell, 2014; Nelson, Froehner, & Gault, 2013). Little, however, defines the challenges and significance of single parents in graduate school (Adair, 2010; Springer, Parker, & Leviten-Reid, 2008).

The benefits of higher education completion for the student in terms economic and social mobility (Cerven, 2013) or the intergenerational educational and social benefits to the student's child (or children) (de Lange, Dronkers, & Wolbers, 2014) are no less than any other student or student family. However, tools designed for traditional students (without dependents) or adapted for two parent families are less effective for single parents (Schumacher, 2013). In a continuing education landscape where nearly one quarter of undergraduates have dependent children and one half of these parent students are single parents (Miller et al., 2011), three-quarters of single parent students are low-income (Schumacher, 2013), low-income student enrollment rise, and family support programs for students decline (Adair, 2010), addressing the issues of the least of these, the low-income single parent student, is critical to educational access and social mobility of families.

Graduate students who are single parents and low-income have similar needs as undergraduates, but not all of the same resources. Both juggle multiple roles as student, professional, and sole care-giver. However, the majority of research, data, and policy provide insights to adult education and community college single parent student populations with a growing amount of understanding and innovation concerning undergraduate single parent students. The single parent graduate student does not have the student support programs of undergraduates, the counseling resources of community college programs, nor do they qualify for the same need based grant programs. This student population is practically invisible and

accommodations generally made on a student by student basis without planning or policy (Springer et al., 2008). The economic overreach, the stress of a graduate program, and the ongoing responsibility of single parenting is generally unexplored. The care-giving responsibilities of low-income parent graduate students, especially single parents, has to be addressed or other efforts to improve access will fall short (Nelson et al., 2013).

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