



## Cornell University Graduate and Professional Student Assembly

### **Draft GPCI-Graduate and Professional Community Initiative:**

# Students with Families

## Introduction

Cornell must recognize and support the unique challenges that students with family responsibilities face in achieving their coursework, teaching, and research goals. Given their limited financial resources and substantial demands on their time, there is no doubt that student parents face substantial hardship that can hinder their academic progress. In addition, graduate and professional students occasionally deal with the challenge of caring for aging or ill parents. Family services and the support structure for student parents and their partners is an issue of student access. Graduate and professional students should not feel the need to choose between attending Cornell and attending to the needs of their families. It should also be emphasized that improved family services and support would help to alleviate many stressors that affect students with families and lead to more positive long-term outcomes for both student parents and their children. A permanent commitment to addressing the needs of students with family responsibilities furthers the University's mission of creating a diverse and inclusive student community.

## Objectives

**Objective 1: Improving students' access to information about resources and data for students with family.**

*Rationale:* The biggest struggles for many graduate and professional student parents are time and money. As student parents new to Cornell or new to parenthood begin to seek out information about raising a family in Ithaca, they often become frustrated and overwhelmed. We applaud the strides made in access to information about resources for students with families through the consolidated [studentswithfamilies.cornell.edu](http://studentswithfamilies.cornell.edu) website that is also widely advertised to new incoming students during orientation. While hiring a single staff member dedicated as point of contact for student parents was not possible due to limited resources, we feel that the establishment of the students with families advisory committee serves well as a substitute that also supports a permanent network of staff and administrators who play a role in providing support services to students and their families with the aim of facilitating increased communication across administrative units. We hope to see the maintenance of these resources. However, we feel that there is still very limited data on students with families in general and there is a lack of support for a peer-to-peer network that would both serve as a community as well as an information exchange platform.

*Actions:*

- a. Improve the students with families website in regards to the following:
  - I. Information about child care options and price ranges for the different options or consider giving more information on the website on low-, mid- and high cost care options.
  - II. Information to child- and family friendly programming, spaces and activities on campus and in the community. Alternatively, provide a link to other websites that keeps an updated calendar of local child-friendly events, and/or add a child-friendly filter to the Cornell events calendar.
  - III. Information about the local or state assistance programs and fellowships for which many graduate and professional students are likely to be eligible, especially in the area of affordable housing like Section 8, or other non-profit organizations that provide low income housing in the area like the Ithaca Neighborhood Housing Services (INHS).
- b. Create a forum or discussion board for students to ask and answer questions.
  - I. Consider/encourage the establishment of a students with family association that can serve as a peer-to-peer support group and information exchange.
- c. Improve data collection on students with families with the aim of increasing usage of and access to existing family services. Potential point of data collection include:
  - I. Asking for family status once a student accepts Cornell's offer of admission.
- a. Increase access to information about emergency and contingency funds by making department staff and faculty more aware of their availability so they can direct students in need to those resources.

**Objective 2: Fostering a supportive academic climate for GPS with family.**

*Rationale:* A myriad of factors contribute to creating a culture that is welcoming to students with children and their partners. We applaud the myriad of family-oriented programming at Hasbrouck and appreciate the availability of short-term mobility permit parking for parents in the late stages of pregnancy and reduced-rate temporary parking permits for breastfeeding mothers who need to leave the campus to breastfeed. Moreover, we are glad for the inclusion of lactation room in the Cornell Interactive Map that also gives precise direction to these rooms within the different university buildings; we hope to see increased awareness of this feature in the future. However, on the issue of parental accommodation, there continues to be variation across departments, staff, and faculty members in both awareness of the policy and how to appropriately accommodate student parents.

*Actions:*

- a. Encourage explicit discussion of the implementation of graduate and professional student parental accommodation policy within departments to increase general awareness of the needs of student parents and to foster a supportive and inclusive academic environment.
- b. Update the GPS parental accommodation policy, in particular:
  - I. Consider extending parental leave from 6 to 8 weeks to reflect recent changes in NYS law.
  - II. Consider instituting a reduced workload period to help new student parents to transition back to academic life, especially if they are required to do this mid-semester.
  - III. Consider current restrictions on when students become eligible for parental leave.
- c. Increase awareness surrounding the scheduling needs of student parents, particularly with respect to the scheduling of courses, meetings, and research commitments during the evening and identifying more appropriately flexible funding sources, e.g. research versus teaching assistantships. This is best

done through a best practices document that can serve as a guideline for departments and academic units.

d. Increase awareness that student parents are eligible to apply for the Provost Diversity Fellowship for Advanced Doctoral Students and expand the pool of money allocated to this Fellowship so that it can accommodate more diverse advanced doctoral students.

e. Improve family support at Hasbrouck and Thurston, in particular:

- I. Deliberate hiring of at least ONE GRA who is a student with family.
- II. Thinking of an intentional family center in the facility.
- III. Reinstating short-term guest parking on site, which would allow frequent guests who provide critical support to the family community (such as babysitters, visiting parents, social workers, tutors, on-site medical personnel, ESL coaches) to park for free.

f. Investigate the possibility of hiring or appointing a staff member to be an advocate for students with family in terms of academic accommodations. Alternatively, increase awareness that the Graduate School is an advocate that can help facilitate negotiations surrounding various departmental or advisor-related accommodations.

### Objective 3: GPS should have access to affordable child care options

*Rationale:* Access to child care is a major concern for many parents. Child care expenses can be particularly prohibitive for student parents, and yet time away from coursework, research, and teaching commitments hinders academic progress. We applaud the expansion of the child care grant that now accounts for special needs and raised the cap for each family. The expansion in the grant money pool is also a welcome progress; and free membership of care.com has improved student parents' ability to find more affordable and flexible child care arrangements. However, even with the current childcare grant structure, student parents are hardly getting enough subsidy and the reach of the grant has remained modest, despite recent aggressive expansions. Due to the high cost of childcare facilities at Cornell's Bright Horizons and the city of Ithaca, the reality remains that most student parents have to find child care alternatives that are further away from their home and workplace.

#### *Actions:*

a. Actively investigate ways to increase the number of applicants for the child care grant, or potentially investigate why there is an underutilization of the grant among students.

b. Consider additional grants that would subsidize other child-related expenses that could potentially hinder a student parent's academic success:

- I. This includes things like additional conference travel grants for students who have to travel with their family, etc.

c. Investigate ways to provide more affordable child care options closer to Cornell. Some solutions include:

- I. Working together with Bright Horizons to decrease cost and wait times.
- II. Supporting and promoting convenient community-based child care programs, such as child care cooperatives with a core professional staff and parent volunteers for support.

### Objective 4: Provide support and inclusion for student partners and spouses.

*Rationale:* Cornell should recognize that supporting the partners and families of students is supporting students. Financial and emotional struggles put an incredible stress on students and their families, which ultimately affects students' abilities to achieve their academic and research goals. Student partners often perform a substantial portion of child care and domestic responsibilities. However, the unfortunate reality is that student partners often experience incredible stress and isolation as their partners pursue a degree at Cornell. Student partners report experiencing emotional distress, stemming from a lack of support, a sense of isolation, a loss of identity, and significant financial worries. This can be especially true for international student partners, who experience additional cultural, legal, and language barriers to meaningfully integrating into the local community. While we applaud the strides that have been made in providing more support and information for student partners in terms of job hunting locally, we feel that student partners, especially those without children, have not been a central part of the discussion surrounding family services in general.

*Actions:*

- a. Identify ways for student partners to build a network and make connections in Ithaca, including:
  - i. Increasing inclusion of student partners in the campus community, such as extending invitations to students partners to participate in on-campus events.
  - ii. Encourage and actively support the building of student partner networks.
- b. Expand career service offerings for graduate and professional student partners, including increasing access to information about acquiring permanent or temporary employment at Cornell.
  - i. The career job fair for student partners should also be expanded into either more sessions, or also an online session or webinar
- c. Extend campus services and resources offered to include student parents when possible