

January 2020



# Redefining Traditional: Making Higher Education Family Friendly

Exploring Possibilities for Bringing Together Student Parents,  
Researchers and Practitioners

Themes and Insights: Design-Thinking Summary



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## Introduction

Student parents face unique challenges in navigating the university experience; so too do the university personnel and student representatives who seek to support them.

To understand how student parents' family responsibilities interact with their experiences as students, the Innovation Hub and the Family Care Office have collaborated since 2018 to collect their stories and identify the tensions and barriers they face. The 2018–2019 inquiry revealed **finding belonging, navigating systems, emotional pressure, and practical needs** as key themes that shape their experience.

Furthermore, the inquiry found a desire for dialogue between student parents and those who work to support them at the university. Heeding this call, the Innovation Hub and Family Care Office expanded their collaboration in Fall 2019 to include several other university partners: the School of Graduate Studies, University of Toronto Libraries, Student Family Housing Services, Kinesiology and Physical Education, and others. All are eager to discuss how to better support student parents in higher education.

With so many interested stakeholders, including student parents themselves, student representatives, and university personnel, the form of such a dialogue—how best to connect and inspire all participants—is itself a design challenge. Thus, this report addresses two questions:

- 1) **What are the challenges and opportunities that university personnel and student representatives encounter in supporting student parents?**
- 2) **What is needed for university personnel and student representatives to talk about creating, together with student parents, more family-friendly higher education?**

This report presents three themes that describe barriers to, and opportunities for, supporting student parents within broader university culture: ***I Want to Know Who You Are; We Are Resources, and We Need to Access Them Too; and Building Community Across Divides***. The themes include discussion questions to prompt conversation and for facilitators to use in dialogues. The Innovation Hub also used these themes to create design principles and recommendations for a June 2020 symposium on student parents' needs.

## Methods

For this project, Innovation Hub designers expanded on their previously collected student-parent data by learning from university personnel and representatives from campus student groups. They worked with eleven participants through nine interviews and two journal exercises. They recruited using purposive sampling, focusing on individuals who support student parents. After contacting potential participants across Canadian institutions, they ultimately sampled from four universities across two provinces.

The Innovation Hub uses qualitative techniques to understand participants' experiences. Design ideas emerge from that understanding. By thoroughly exploring the 'problem space' before thinking of solutions, Innovation Hub designers grasp what participants genuinely need. They focus on seeking diverse participants, meeting them as equals, and encouraging them to speak in depth.

## Themes and Insights

Through these methods insights were further organized under three key themes: **I Want to Know Who You Are, We Are Resources, and We Need Access To Them Too, and Building Community Across Divides**. These themes structure the following sections of the report, in which we present the results of our analysis of interviews and additional data.

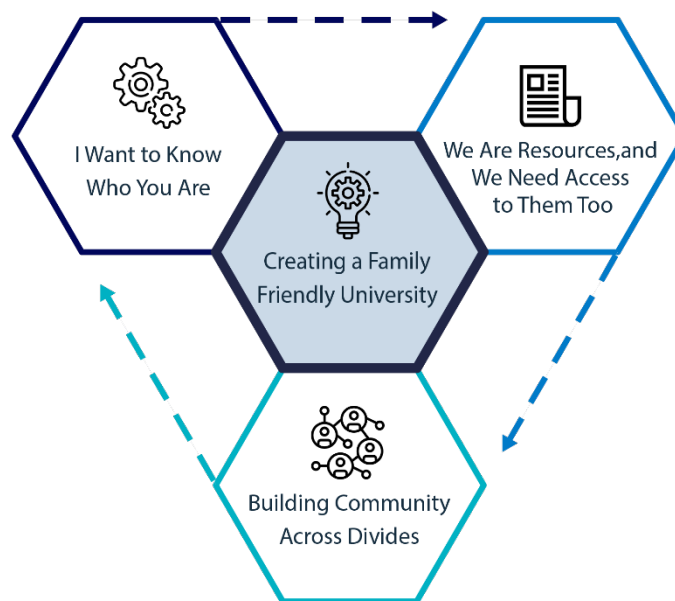


Figure 1. Visualization of three themes

## Theme One: I Want to Know Who You Are



Both university personnel and student representatives want to better understand student-parent perspectives so they can tailor their support. Demographic data would help them do so but is often lacking. To fill this deficiency, they use creative strategies to learn about the populations they serve. Some also bring understanding from their own lived experience as student parents.

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### Unknown Demographics: A Challenge to Reaching Out

University personnel and student representatives were frustrated because they had little data on student-parent demographics. Knowing where to find student parents would help them reach out to these individuals, understand needs, and better advocate. They used observations and anecdotes to get a general sense of student-parent demographics. For example, they guessed that they served largely graduate students, who are more likely “to be at the age where they are ready for family life,” and that the main subgroups among student parents are Indigenous and international students. University personnel agree that they work mainly with women. As one person shared:

*“I don’t keep stats around gender, but kind of anecdotally [...] I think once people realize that I’ll deal with their partners, I end up dealing mostly with women.”*

Compared to staff, student representatives were less clear about their student-parent demographics, partly because student-parent support is not their primary purpose, and they do not always have direct contact. One person described the challenges she faced in reaching student parents:

*“Whenever I’ve talked to anyone doing this work, we have the same challenges identifying the students [...] They’re a hard population to reach. Most places don’t have good demographic data.”*

To fill in the missing data on student parents, university personnel and student representatives rely on generalizations, but they cannot know if these truly reflect their student demographics. This makes it harder for them both to reach student parents and to provide them with useful services. To get more data within these limitations, staff use creative strategies.

### Looking for Data in Unexpected Places

University personnel suspect that more students with family responsibilities are out there, and they use creative strategies to gather data on this hidden population. They solve their own need for information by sharing and discussing with colleagues, and looking for data in unexpected places. As one person said:

*“We started a new list [for] parents to re-register so that we are up to date with the current students. A lot of people have graduated, [but] we might not have taken them off our list. And so, we wanted to really clean that up and see what the real numbers are, but it's a constant struggle.*

*We don't really know .... I've worked a little bit with the assessment team in student services to [...] see if we can survey students to get more demographic info, but that hasn't gone very far [...] I have very patchy numbers [...]*

*The number that keeps coming up is three to four per cent are caregivers or have dependents in some way. I don't know how accurate [that] is. It's like the people who sign up for health-insurance coverage for dependents [...] I think there's a lot of people who fall into those gaps that aren't being captured. ”*

Another staff member used a similar strategy, identifying potential student parents by tracking dependent-health-coverage purchases through the international, postgraduate, and undergraduate health-insurance plans.

Working within limits, staff and student representatives use such creative methods to identify student parents. But they want to solve the root problem: there is no comprehensive information on student-parent demographics, and they need more accessible data and better ways of gathering it.

For those with lived experience as students and student parents, another way to understand the people they serve is empathy.

## **I've Been in Your Shoes**

Those with lived experience of being student parents themselves brought this background to their work. Their own stories helped them empathize with student parents and taught them how to navigate university systems. As one staff member, who as an undergraduate student had a young child, said:

*“I never realized that all of that [undergraduate work] I put in over those three years [...] would directly relate to what I'm doing right now. And I have the language and so it is possible, having something that contextualizes the student experience with the personal experience ...”*

Another staff member, who works full time to support students with family responsibilities, also explained how her experience has given her empathy for other students and fuelled her desire to pay it forward, saying:

*“When I joined the university ... I had so much to offer because of my own personal experience. [Also,] I just liked working with people, and adults especially, so I fit right in .... These are people who are coming back [...] for a second career, or they have kids, so they want a better life, and they want to come back to university .... Because to get that better job, or the*



*degree, you need that piece of paper that says you qualify for it, and I wanted to help [on] their journey. I wish somebody would have helped me. And actually, I did, I created my own support system. "*

A student representative who is currently studying while parenting also said that her experience helps her to empathize with fellow students. She uses what she learns in her role to share information with other student parents and help them navigate the university system. All these participants harnessed their lived experience as students and student parents to support others.

*How does the experience of support staff and student representatives compare to that of student parents themselves?*

*As we reported previously, student parents feel invisible on campus and uncomfortable disclosing that they have children. These experiences both reflect and contribute to the lack of information reported by university personnel and student representatives.*

### Discussion Questions:

- What gaps have you encountered in your understanding of student parents? What has improved your understanding?
- What, if any, creative practices do you use to gather and analyze data about your student-parent demographics? What other creative strategies could you use?
- What barriers, including stigma and other factors, might discourage students from identifying as parents?
- How can we foster empathy among those who do not have lived experience of parenting while studying?

## Theme Two: We Are Resources, and We Need Access to Them Too



**University personnel and student representatives also face challenges and show creativity in accessing resources.** To complete their work and help their students, they must **gather resources; navigate university, government, and community support; and help students themselves to navigate.** They do all this while **juggling multiple roles** and feeling constrained by funding.

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### Gathering Resources Within the Institution

When gathering resources to help student parents, university staff experience a range of outcomes. Some find success networking with other services and departments, while others feel isolated and disconnected from both their colleagues and student parents. Networks are crucial: because of constrained finances, resources are best amplified by tapping personal contacts and forming partnerships to deliver events and programs.

One staff member, who works in a large office, successfully optimized shared resources:

*“The community I found is very receptive. Like, the gym and athletics department [...] I've asked them if they can provide [...] a subsidy for student parents, and they have agreed to allow our members [to] get a fifty-per-cent discount on gym-membership fees [...] A lot of members love that they can go to the gym, and work out, and not have to pay a whole lot of money [...] So that's an ongoing thing I've been able to work with the gym to continue offering .... And I try to let them know that, you know, we always need the help. We don't have a lot of money, but we want to do great things. People are interested to help when it benefits children.”*

To provide program support, this person had collaborated with other university units, such as the bookstore, and with student volunteers to provide programming such as arts and crafts for families. In contrast, another person described their experience of relative isolation:

*“I'm one of a small team, and I have a minuscule budget too. [...] This role hasn't been around for a long time, and the thing that I've seen that's been the most useful when I talk to other people from other schools is high-level institutional support. I think people at that level are glad that family care exists, but I think the details of what family care does or not, they're not too concerned [about that]. So there hasn't been a lot of what I would say high-level support for policy initiatives or other space ...”*

Faced by tight budgets, staff amplify existing resources by working together. However, new services need support from colleagues and superiors, which is difficult to find for those in isolated roles.



## Governmental & Community Support

Though personnel and student representatives saw the university as part of a larger community, surprisingly few spoke about community and government resources. Instead, they focused on the services within their institutions. This shows the limits to what university personnel and student representatives can accomplish alone and suggests that university resources may be disconnected from the broader context.

One staff member exceptionally noted the specific challenges facing international students:

*“I deal with a lot of international students [and] families, and their access to services looks really different than domestic students. Even accessing healthcare in [this province] is hard for everyone.”*

This person connected students with community supports outside of the university, but was limited in time, capacity, and support for her to develop this knowledge herself. The link between the university and the wider community shows up only weakly, if at all, in the everyday experiences of staff and student representatives.

## Recognizing Multiple Roles

University personnel and student representatives alike spoke of wearing multiple hats in their work. Their broader roles and life experiences help them support student parents. They also recognized that student parents themselves have several roles and responsibilities, and they try to help in a way that respects this multiplicity.

One participant said that his efforts to help students juggle their roles and responsibilities are tied to the support he provides as an educator. By recognizing that the two are entwined, he creates a holistically accessible experience:

*“I’m giving them the permission to do what they love to, even though they’re being there in an academic setting, and they’re being given papers to write, and they think that they’re so distant from the content. Looking for ways that they can bring things from their real life into the classroom and looking at ways that you can make [...] the project or the essay or whatever it is complementary to what they’re living in their life, so that it’s relevant to them. I think relevance in education is a big deal.”*

Another talked about navigating the system to help student parents access childcare, a need on the top of their minds.

*“Access to childcare is by far the number one issue that people are navigating. I mean, there is subsidized daycare at the provincial level, which is an amazing resource, but it’s challenging to access it [...] and people arrive not realizing that the system ... they don’t realize how the system works. And they need help navigating that. And informal childcare too ...”*

University personnel and student representatives play critical roles in helping student parents navigate the university experience. These roles often exceed a single job description and include a range of supportive endeavours.

*How does the experience of support staff and student representatives compare to that of student parents themselves?*

*Previous reports found that student parents have too little time to navigate the complex systems that stand between them and support services. Thus, they mention a need for many resources, unaware that these already exist. Like student parents, university personnel and student representatives must also navigate university systems; when they learn to do so successfully, they use this expertise to help students.*

### Discussion Questions:

- How have you used resources from other units to support your own work? Who else would you like to collaborate with?
- How is your university connected to, or disconnected from, the broader community? How could your work supporting student parents benefit from connections with community or other services?
- As someone who helps student parents, what support do you need in order to provide support yourself?

## Theme Three: Building Community Across Divides



University personnel and student representatives want to build community for student parents and with their own colleagues. Those who feel best able to support student parents are embedded in **networks with colleagues**, student representatives, and other personnel. Conversely, when staff and student representatives struggle to **bridge institutional divides**, they feel isolated. They also question their **visibility and value in university culture**.

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### Bridging Institutional Divides: University Personnel and Student Representatives

University personnel and student representatives alike had experiences of limited dialogue with one another. Some staff have connections with student group representatives, but they say that student turnover makes these hard to sustain. One participant shared:

*"I talk to the student government at the graduate and undergraduate level pretty regularly, and I've been trying to work with the undergraduate students' society to get a [...] childcare collective, what it could look like, [and to get] a lot of different things off the ground.*

*But the challenge, I think, [has] been finding students who are committed and have the time, because student parents don't have any time. And finding students who are interested in taking on a leadership role in a project to develop something new has been a bit challenging .... Anything involving student government is hard because they change every year. And the folks who've been supporting it turned over ...?"*

Student representatives have a more cynical attitude about the university, saying that they are not given due voice. While this feeling does not preclude partnering with staff, it restricts the possibilities they see for dialogue.

### Connecting with Colleagues

All university personnel and student representatives from our sample feel strongly about connecting and talking with colleagues (i.e., fellow university personnel or fellow student representatives). Some successfully maximize resources this way, but others face challenges in forming networks. They discussed feelings of both connectedness, for example in having active relationships with colleagues across departments and units, and isolation. For instance, one staff member said:

*"I tried to do some outreach to student-facing staff as well. We do an event called 'speed updating' for student-affairs professionals and student-services professionals .... I went last year to be like, 'Hey, I exist.' And everyone's like, 'What? You exist? We've never heard about this thing.' And I tried to go to stuff that doesn't even seem necessarily like it's a hundred per*

*cent relevant, like I went to a fair for staff last year. Just [...] to be out there and be visible and be like, 'Hey, are you a student-facing staff? This role exists!' And I found sometimes doing stuff [...] that just doesn't immediately seem like an obvious fit has actually been quite beneficial, just because it gets a different kind of visibility for my program. But it's been about getting really creative. "*

Participants often build community with colleagues and counterparts informally. One person described being approached by future colleagues to create a presentation on the child-friendly services they offered. Otherwise, she would only have known one other person doing similar support work, but in another province.

Responding to a question about dialogue with counterparts, one staff member said:

*"My counterparts, I'm still figuring out who my counterparts are."*

Student representatives share similar examples of divides and informal opportunities for connection. One person commented on the general challenge of university silos thus:

*"You know, there are a lot of things that are great about being here. As much as I have a lot of complaints [...] it's still a privilege and honour to be able to access such an institution .... But the worst part about it is that everyone works in silos. So everyone is working on great things and great initiatives on their own, and they're all working in different circles. I hear about some great projects that student groups are doing on campus, but we've never communicated .... If we all just have a better connection and collaboration on these bigger issues, it would be great. And that's what I mean by interconnectivity, because ultimately, we can find anywhere to connect on common grounds ...."*

Connecting with colleagues is an opportunity and a challenge. Creating chances for university personnel and student representatives to connect is critical for supporting student parents.

## Visibility & Value in University Culture

Both student parents and those who support them feel that they are neither visible nor valuable in university culture. Though staff and student representatives did not say this directly, they implied it across many interviews, talking about both themselves and student parents. Support, or lack thereof, can also be interpreted as a question of value: when personnel and representatives feel well supported, they feel valuable; when they feel less supported, they sense that they are not important. One participant said:

*"I definitely do [have extensive support networks], and it is because I love what I do. I really wish that the program itself had better infrastructure that complemented all of the support [...] available to us at the university, but like I said, the fact that we're in a bubble [...] and we have, you know, limited appointments and a lot of contract workers ... those things have definitely impacted our ability to hold together an infrastructure to help the students, which is bad in some ways, but it's also helped us rely more heavily on the resources of the university, which are good ...."*

This person stressed the importance of involving students and student parents in ongoing dialogues. Participation is empowering:

*“They’d like to have good representation for themselves, so that they can develop that sense of identity and control and feeling like they belong at the university as well.”*

Another participant said that conversations should be even more inclusive. They gave a reminder that students are parents because of their children, who should also have a voice:

*“I’d also like to hear from kids, too. I think we forget their voices. But it’s nice to hear [...] what they feel like when they [...] come into a place like this, how it makes them feel [...] what would make them feel more comfortable. And yeah, just things that they might want to do when they’re here.”*

Like student parents (and perhaps their children), staff and student group representatives working in family care feel invisible and undervalued. Their contributions need to be better recognized.

*How does the experience of support staff and student representatives compare to that of student parents themselves?*

*As student parents seek belonging in university culture, so do university personnel and student representatives. The latter seek to build community with their colleagues and among student parents, but face challenges in doing so. Overcoming these challenges, both within and across higher-education institutions, will make student parents and those who work with them feel visible and valuable.*

## Discussion Questions:

- In your work to support student parents, whom do you have good relationships with? What connections are lacking?
- What events or interactions would encourage dialogue between university personnel and student-group representatives?
- What material and symbolic acts from higher administration would make student parents, student representatives, and university personnel feel valued?
- How can we invite children to the conversation?

## Personas

All our participants had unique experiences and perspectives, but they also shared common patterns that reflected their roles and the university culture. Felisha, James, and Cynthia are three archetypal personas who show the similarities and differences across the aggregate data.

### Felicia

- **University Personnel Member**
- Supports undergraduate and graduate students in their university



*“I think part of what has really helped is that I’ve developed personal networks with others around me.”*

I’ve worked for many years in a university role supporting undergraduate and graduate students, including student parents. I was a student parent myself during undergrad, and while I would describe myself as an energetic person, it was tough at times! Being a full time student and a mom at the same time involved a lot of creative parenting, and I benefitted a lot from the supports I found.

I feel so fortunate to be able to use this experience when I help students in my current job. I have great colleagues across the university whom I can turn to for advice and resources, and we collaborate on small initiatives. I think part of what has really helped is that I’ve developed personal networks with others around me. This is critical for my work and the success of my program, as we operate with a minimal budget and staffing. There is a “know-how” to being a student parent, and to working within the university institution as well. Seeking support is critical to both, and I’m glad to be that bridge for others.

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### Felicia’s Journey:

Felicia brings her background knowledge as a former student parent to her current role helping others. Her own experience is invaluable in understanding their needs. At the same time, she feels frustrated because she isn’t sure whom she is serving. She hopes her personal experience will guide her through her next steps: accessing and navigating university resources. Indeed, she uses what she has learned to create her own network within and outside of the university. She feels valuable and connected. This support helps her create a sense of community by organizing events for student parents and engaging with colleagues, which makes her feel energized and enthusiastic.



## James

- **University Personnel Member**
- Has been in a role supporting students for five years



*"I was excited to be brought into this role, but I have found it isolating and difficult at times."*

I've worked for five years in a role supporting students, including student parents. I was never a student parent myself, but was involved deeply in student issues since my time as an undergraduate student, and I care deeply about helping others to connect with resources and navigate university life.

I was excited to be brought into this role, but I have found it isolating and difficult at times. I'm not embedded in a larger office. I have a broad portfolio that contributes to multiple student-service projects, while being solely responsible for student-parent initiatives. Sometimes I'm not sure that others know my role exists! I'd love to have the time to connect with more colleagues across the institution, and to learn about what work others are doing on other campuses.

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## James's Journey

James wants to understand his student-parent demographic, so he looks at past data and tries to collect more through surveys. He feels frustrated with the data silos at the university. At the same time, he is hopeful about the future and his ability to help this important group. When he tries to access resources, he uses his lens as former university student but ends up feeling lost and frustrated. His desire to help student parents continues to motivate him, and he wonders how others tackle this issue at their institutions. Though he tries to build a community, he feels invisible and undervalued. He is left wondering how he could build a more supportive network and make the university value his position.

## Cynthia

- **Student Representative**
- Has been a student representative for two years



*“...I am limited in my time and resource capacity to do outreach and pursue new initiatives.”*

I’ve been active as a student representative for the past two years. This is likely my final year in this role, as it comes with a two-year term. I’m aware that there is a high turnover among student representatives, due to our term lengths and other commitments (including graduating!), and wonder sometimes if this helps or harms communications with university personnel. It’s tricky to develop longer-term connections here.

I really do strive to create a focus on student parents in my role, but I am limited in my time and resource capacity to do outreach and pursue new initiatives. I’m juggling multiple volunteer, work, school, and life obligations, and trying to be of service as well. I would like more opportunities to communicate and collaborate in meaningful ways with university services and personnel, but have yet to find an effective way to do this.

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## Cynthia’s Journey

As a student-parent advocate, Cynthia has a very difficult time understanding the needs of student parents. Her role has high turnover, which makes it difficult for her to understand long-term issues. She feels frustrated and is left wondering how she could ever learn more, given that she doesn’t even know where to look for resources. She worries about what will happen when her time as a student representative is over, and how the information and resources she finds will be passed along. She feels isolated from student-parent personnel and like she has to navigate the system alone. Trying to build a lasting community before she leaves, she connects with other student representatives to create new events and preserve them, which grows her sense of hope.

## Design Principles

Inspired by the data, these principles were designed to guide effective multi-stakeholder dialogue about supporting student parents. They will be useful for university personnel, student representatives, and student parents who want to collaboratively improve the higher-education experience.

<b>Harness Creativity</b>	<b>Cultivate Curiosity</b>	<b>Re-examine Inclusion</b>	<b>Focus on Strengths</b>	<b>Be Mindful of Time</b>
<b>Promote Long-Term Connections</b>	<b>Kids are Participants</b>	<b>Learn from Experts</b>	<b>Create Opportunities for Influence</b>	<b>Make Time for Storytelling</b>

- 1) Harness Creativity:** University personnel and student representatives have found creative strategies to support student parents. By sharing hacks, tips, and tricks among themselves, they can help more people use and navigate university resources. To harness this creativity, encourage participants to reflect on their own practices. Strategy-sharing sessions can spur new, collective creativity.
- 2) Cultivate Curiosity:** Curiosity is the key to empathy, especially given the diversity of needs and lived experiences among student parents. Facilitate deeper dialogue by encouraging respectful questions and openness to the unexpected and unfamiliar.
- 3) Re-examine Inclusion:** All dialogues should begin by recognizing power dynamics, and those who are not as often heard should have specific opportunities to share their perspectives. Inclusion also means access, in both the built environment and timing (to accommodate work and childcare). Successful diverse dialogues should be welcoming to all and improve by learning from successes and mistakes.
- 4) Focus on Strengths:** Both university personnel and student representatives have valuable experiences to share, but they sometimes find it difficult to communicate even on the common ground of supporting student parents. To produce more productive and respectful dialogues, focus on the strengths of all parties and of existing ties. Start by identifying the strengths of both groups or by asking participants to verbalize or write down their commonalities. Diverse perspectives are valuable, but commonalities help participants to first come together.



**5) Be Mindful of Time:** University personnel, student representatives, and student parents all juggle multiple work, school, and family responsibilities. Meetings and events should be child-friendly or held within childcare hours, and also accommodate the constraints of daily work. Events with several options for participation—multiple times, online components—allow more people to participate.



**6) Promote Long-Term Connections:** University personnel and student representatives are seeking connection. They feel isolated at multiple levels, including at the basic thresholds of being able to identify their counterparts at other institutions and having close ties to colleagues. By creating opportunities for people to work together on problems, event organizers model how collaboration might work beyond their activity. Encouraging information sharing and discussion also gives a dialogue an “afterlife.”



**7) Kids are Participants:** Kids are participants too. They should be invited into dialogue spaces, either for supervision or to actively contribute. Ensure that the timing and venues are family friendly. Consider how to welcome children into conversations and activities.



**8) Learn from Experts:** Every field has its experts, and in the world of student-parent experience, there are academic researchers, policymakers, administrators, front line staff, and students who live the higher-education realities shaped by all the others. Treat student parents as experts in their own experience. Recognize all expertise, and invite people to learn from each other.



**9) Create Opportunities for Influence:** Invite people in positions of influence to participate and listen to university personnel, student groups, and student parents. By sharing concerns, perspectives, and creative strategies with higher-education policymakers and people in university governance (where appropriate), student parents and those who support them can increase their reach. All parties will learn from the dialogue.



**10) Make Time for Storytelling:** Everyone has valuable lived experiences that drive them to speak up for change. Storytelling sessions encourage event participants to actively listen and learn from one another. Narratives illustrate discussion topics in a way that connects, engages, and inspires.



## Draft Practical Solutions: Core Elements for a Successful Symposium

Based on the design principles, these core recommendations for the June 2020 symposium cover everything from building a guest list to managing the nitty-gritty event-day details.

### 1) How to build a guest list:



- **Who to invite:** Invite a broad range of stakeholders, including university personnel, higher-education personnel, student representatives, student parents, administrators, and policymakers. The symposium presents an exciting and rare opportunity to bring these groups together.
- **How to invite them:** Stakeholders can circulate a general, open call-for-participants on relevant list-servs and forums and among colleagues. But given that student groups sometimes feel alienated from administration, we recommend directly inviting key players. Student leaders can be asked to share the open call among their groups. Potential targets include student-group and union leaders across UofT and other Toronto campuses. Administrators and policymakers, especially at higher levels, should be personally invited. Student parents can be invited through the Family Care Office and other university service networks. Calls for participants may also be sent through undergraduate-student newsletters.
- **Details to share/solicit:** To make the event inclusive, provide venue details so participants can request accommodations. At registration, ask participants to volunteer critical details: name, role, affiliated institution, accessibility requirements, childcare needs, allergies, etc.

### 2) Possible forms of dialogue:



- **Keynote speaker:** The participants in this project expressed a strong desire to learn from colleagues and experts about best practices in the field of supporting student parents. An opening keynote speaker is a great way to get participants excited about sharing their own perspectives.  
The symposium keynote speaker is already confirmed: Dr. Tricia van Rhijn is an Associate Professor at the University of Guelph and an expert in early childhood and adult education. She conducts groundbreaking research on the higher-education experiences of student parents and mature students.
- **Roundtable discussion:** To recognize the expertise of all groups, we recommend a facilitated roundtable discussion with a student representative, a university staff member, an administrator or policymaker, and a student parent. Participants should be directly invited and provided with prompts in advance. The discussion can show multiple perspectives and spur dialogue among conference attendees as their perspectives align and diverge from the roundtable.
- **Facilitated activities:** A diverse dialogue will include participants who have many styles of communication and learning. To encourage everyone to share their stories and forge connections, we recommend a range of concurrent activities for participants to choose among. All the options should model empathy as a central discussion value. Example activities include:
  - *Icebreakers:* We recommend an icebreaker at the beginning of any facilitated activity. Participants will get to know one another, feel included, and build budding connections.

- *A design sprint:* This activity can follow a roundtable or panel discussion. Participants split into groups and share with one another what they learned and one challenge that their new knowledge will help them tackle.

Then they proceed to the design sprint. The objective is to turn a problem into an opportunity for influence. Participants question their assumptions and share their ideas to collaborate on new solutions.

First, define a problem statement. Gather information about the problem by asking each team member to contribute their knowledge and expertise. Then the team designs and prototypes rough solutions based on their collective ideas. After the individual groups have finished, invite groups to share their prototypes with each other and give feedback.

This activity **harnesses creativity** while **focusing on strengths**: participants contribute their own expertise and perspectives to obtain a group result. The activity takes 60–90 minutes and requires facilitation.

*Inclusion/exclusion-based activity:* Ask participants to write about a time when they felt particularly included and appreciated for their work and a time when they felt excluded. Then, share stories in small groups and reflect on the differences and similarities. Reconnecting as a larger group, ask a few people to share again.

This activity encourages an examination of inclusion and equity: it helps identify the values behind *how* and *why* policy changes should be made. When the power dynamics in the group are appropriately addressed, this activity can encourage student parents, university personnel, and student representatives to consider each other's perspectives.

*Reflection session:* A closing reflection allows participants to summarize what they learned, explore the things that piqued their curiosity, and develop their own “take home” action plans. The session, which can be conducted in small or large groups, should open with prompts that encourage participants to identify what has changed for them from entering the symposium to leaving it.

### 3) The “afterlife” of the symposium



- **Informal networking:** Built-in informal networking time allows participants to build personal rapport and long-term connections. It can take place during a morning refreshment break, at a catered lunch hour, and during a closing reflection activity.
- **Facilitate sharing through contact lists and online platforms:** To solidify connections, circulate (with consent) a contact list or create an online platform for continued discussion. Collect contact information by allowing participants to opt in to sharing their personal details. Use list-servs, Facebook pages, or other online tools to foster long-term connections.
- **Documentation:** As this report found, people develop many creative strategies to support student parents that are not documented. To preserve and share this information, document the event and discussions. Entry and exit surveys both invite feedback and preserve information. Taking photos (with permission) and inviting university communications personnel or journalists also creates a living memory.



#### 4) Access on event day:



- **Make all experts welcome:** Recognize all participants as experts. Make them feel invited through direct personal invitations, help with travel and registration, childcare subsidies, and family-friendly spaces. Avoid the use of jargon, which excludes people who do not share the same area of expertise. Use shared language and explain key concepts or words for a generalist audience.
- **Childcare:** A symposium about family-friendly education should model family-friendly dialogues. Welcome children and provide childcare.
- **Washrooms, space, and food:** Make the space accessible by ensuring there are signed all-gender washrooms, encouraging participants not to wear heavy scents, and asking them about access needs in advance, with the caveat that not all needs can be accommodated. Catered meals and snacks should include many dietary options: vegan, vegetarian, gluten-free, and halal.
- **Flow of participants:** Many participants will only be able to attend partially: arriving late, leaving early, or coming and going. Before the event, communications should explicitly accommodate drop-in/out attendance. Stay on schedule and provide breaks to cover delays and overrunning sessions.
- **Web option:** Consider online options for participation, such as livestreaming the keynote address to participants who pay the registration fee, in part or full, but cannot attend the symposium in person. (This also creates documentation.)

## Limitations and Next Steps

There are limitations to the data and findings in every project, and it is important to consider how the analysis may fall short or require follow-up. Suggestions for next steps recommend inquiries or actions that may be incorporated into future work related to this project.

### Limitations:

Three sampling limitations affect the findings. First, the data reflects the experiences of university personnel and student representatives who are already thinking about how to improve student-parent services. Because of the selection criteria and participants' *self-selection*, those who participated did so feeling they had a valuable perspective to share. Moreover, they had the time to share it. Second, the interviews were limited to students and staff at top-tier universities, although recruitment was attempted at smaller universities. This may skew findings about the resources, in finances and collaborations, available to participants. Finally, the one-time interview with each participant captured a snapshot of their current and past experience, but sacrificed a perspective on long-term trends (e.g., how length of experience affects community-building efforts or how institutional norms about collection and dissemination of student information change over time).

### Next Steps:

The June 2020 symposium is one step towards making higher education more family friendly. Other methods include:

- Circulating the report to participants, UofT communities, and communities at other universities;
- Discussing the insights with university stakeholders;
- Finding ways to better support university personnel when they reach out to student parents and try to build community;
- Creating initiatives that help university personnel and student representatives identify and communicate with their counterparts in other institutions; and
- Developing plans to include student representatives and student parents in any efforts to improve their higher-education experience.

## Conclusion

This project built on insights collected from student parents and expanded to focus also on the experiences of those who work with them: university personnel and student-group representatives. The themes that emerged—*I Want to Know Who You Are*; *We Are Resources and We Need to Access Them Too*; and *Building Community Across Divides*—reflected the specific roles of these participants, but also challenges and opportunities common in university culture. It is clear that all parties want increased dialogue about how to support student parents. The recommendations provided for the June 2020 symposium will spark this conversation.



Figure 2. Imagery of family friendly spaces and activities

## Student Contributors



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