THE IMPACT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY ON THE GRADUATE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

A Thesis

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by

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Graduate and Professional Studies in Education
Abstract of THE IMPACT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY ON THE GRADUATE STUDENT EXPERIENCE by Hani Chiyomi Rahman

Brief Literature Review

Graduate students as a population are often underserved and under-represented, in terms of student services, by universities that typically focus on undergraduate student populations. This discrepancy may largely be explained by the fact that graduate student populations are typically only a fraction of the total student population. However, graduate students are an important population for administrations to acknowledge. Graduate students contribute toward the overall body of research in education and further prepare the future workforce in countless fields.

Statement of the Problem

It was the purpose of this study to explore the perceived effects having a family can have on the graduate student experience. The study looked at the types of student services that graduate student parents need to enhance their graduate school experience. The student experience is viewed in the context of how student services affect overall personal satisfaction and academic progress within a student’s years in graduate school.
Methodology

The methodology used for this study was qualitative. Research was collected via interviews. This allowed for the participants to express their experience in a narrative format, providing a deeper insight into their experiences.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of the study provide insight into how graduate student parents go through graduate school while maintaining their familial responsibilities. Many felt frustrated with the services available at P.C.U. and wanted additional support and guidance to assist with the stress of balancing school work and home life as well as the guilt associated with having priorities split between schoolwork and family life. Academically, graduate student parents do not feel supported and feel that they were not given the tools to successfully navigate through this experience.

__________________________, Committee Chair
José Chávez, Ed.D.

__________________________
Date
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this to Camellia who was there for me even when I was not able to be there for myself.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Overview

Due to the unique demands of graduate school, students attending masters or PhD programs are often juggling more responsibilities than the average undergraduate student. Undergraduates are typically in the 18-24 year age range, whereas the ages of graduate students tend to vary widely. Many undergraduates will take a few years before attending graduate school for reasons such as gaining work experience, learning about a field, or exploring new interests. Because of this, graduate students often return to school after having a family or may start a family during the course of their graduate studies. However, many parents feel they cannot meet both the demands of parenthood and those of being a dedicated student and can feel a pressure from society, those around them, or themselves to make a choice (Springer, Parker, & Leviten-Reid, 2009).

Statement of the Problem

It was the purpose of this study to explore the perceived effects having a family can have on the graduate student experience. The study looks at the types of student services that graduate student parents need to enhance their graduate school experience. The student experience is viewed in the context of how student services affect overall
personal satisfaction and academic progress within a student’s years in graduate school. The following research questions were addressed in the study:

1. What types of academic and personal challenges do graduate students face when it comes to school?
2. What types of resources or specialized support do graduate students have access to in their prospective graduate programs?
3. How do specialized resources or institutional support meet graduate student expectations?
4. What do graduate students with families (children) feel their specific needs are when it comes to student services?
5. Do graduate students with families feel their specific needs are being met by their institution?

Significance of the Study

This study aims to educate graduate students, both current students and those considering graduate school, about the challenges graduate students with families face as well as the services universities provide. This study also aims to inform schools of methods to improve the graduate school experience for students with families. With this information, colleges will be able to more fully understand the issues students with families face and provide resources that cater to this specific population.
Definition of Terms

Academic Success

The student’s perception of success within higher education. This could be based on time until graduation, GPA, dedication level, self-satisfaction, or any other qualities the student believes show his or her current success within academia.

Obstacles

Any circumstances the student feels may interfere with and/or inhibit his or her academic success, whether external, emotional, mental, or other.

Student Development

The way in which a student can grow, progress, or increase his or her developmental capabilities as a result of attendance at a higher education institution (Evans, Forney, Guideo, Patton, & Renn, 2010).

Student Services

Infrastructure designed to address the non-intellectual, non-academic needs of college students, such as counseling, student health services, or career development (Harper & Jackson, 2011).

Organization of Thesis

This study began with an overview of the issue being studied, a statement of the problem, the significance of the study, and a definition of terms in Chapter 1. Chapter 2 provides a review of available literature to provide a background on graduate student
parents and the student services available to them. Graduate student needs and specific student services are reviewed and the effect these services have on student involvement and student development are discussed. In Chapter 3, the methodology of the study is discussed. The design of the study, data collection procedures, and how the data were analyzed is presented. Chapter 4 presents the results of the study based on the research. The thesis ends with Chapter 5 providing the summary, conclusions, and recommendations for future research.
Chapter 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This chapter provides insight into the graduate student experience at colleges and universities in the United States. It highlights the specific needs of graduate students in college or university and also focuses on the resources available to the population. Graduate students as a population are often underserved and under-represented in terms of student services by universities that typically focus on undergraduate student populations. This discrepancy may largely be explained by the fact that graduate student populations are typically only a fraction of the total student population. However, graduate students contribute significantly to the overall research-produced academics and social culture of a school and are part of an important population for administrations to acknowledge.

Student Learning and Development

The college experience is not exclusively measured in academic learning. College students are expected grow and develop academically but also to achieve growth through personal development. Student development for an individual is a comprehensive, holistic, and transformative activity. This development occurs both in undergraduates and graduate students (Keeling, 2004).
The National Association of Student Personnel found that student development can be categorized into three critical areas: social context, academic context, and institutional context (Keeling, 2004). The social context involves the development of relationships at the individual level, such as personal relationships with peers and professors, and at the group level, developing connections with those in similar programs. The academic context highlights brain-based learning, including classroom learning but also outside opportunities for reflective judgment and critical thinking. Relationships with professors in which students can freely learn more about a subject outside the classroom can lead to the development of social context as well as academic context. Institutional context refers to the role a student has in their overall college or university. Their jobs, assistantships, and overall service to the school can contribute to this along with the culture of the campus itself, such as the behavior of students, traditions, and overall atmosphere. When all three elements are addressed, a student can then achieve a more developed idea of his or her role in society, including within personal and family lives (Keeling, 2004).

As student development can differ amongst individual students and across institutions, so can overall learning styles. Learning style, the way in which students approach learning, is extremely varied amongst students. It is visible in an academic and social context and can greatly enhance a student’s experience in higher education. Learning style is inherent in a student but can be shaped by the environment, or to a
particular style. It can also be developed based on the culture and background of the student (Keeling, 2004).

David Kolb (as cited in Evans et al., 2010) focused on learning styles and the implications for how learning styles and student development can affect a student in the context of their higher education. Kolb highlighted that learning can be divided into four distinct cyclical stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. First, a student will go through an experience in the concrete experience stage. Reflective observation occurs when a student reflects upon his or her experience, contemplating potential outcomes and conclusions from various perspectives. This leads to the development of ideas in the abstract conceptualization stage, which become integrated in how the student learns. Once integrated, the student will act upon what he or she has learned in the active experimentation stage and start to form an awareness of the implications of the new ideas. Students develop unique learning styles by preferring certain steps and focusing more time and energy on these particular stages. For example, students with an affinity for problem solving typically prefer to spend more time in the abstract conceptualization and active experimentation stages, whereas students who are more likely to accommodate new ideas focus on the concrete experience and active experimentation stages (Evans et al., 2010).

Because student learning is extremely varied among the student population, higher education institutions must be aware of the diversity in learning styles. These
learning styles can be addressed, once overall student needs are determined, by applying current and applicable student development theories.

**Graduate Student Needs**

With limited resources and funding at higher education institutions, resource allocation is determined by multiple factors. These factors include the student population that stands to benefit from the resources, the current and future student need, the process of and conclusions from administrative decision making, or they can be based on the direction from which the resources come. The graduate student population continues to increase, especially at research-oriented institutions. This increase in population should be matched with an increase in student services, with a commitment to focus on graduate student personal and academic well-being.

Graduate study can involve a significant amount of independent research and work. Although graduate programs can have different end-goals, much of the graduate student experience can overlap for students across different institutions. What stays consistent among all graduate students are the types of resources they need in terms of student services, such as a graduate student advisor; specific research space including special accommodations with the library; and special workshops, conferences, and seminars geared toward graduate students (Brandes, 2006). When comparing their experience to their undergraduate career, graduate students feel they require more academic support (Smith, 2010). This is likely due not to an increase in need of support
from their undergraduate careers but rather a decrease in services while maintaining the same needs. According to Rempel, Hussong-Christian, and Mellinger (2011), graduate students reported they did not receive significant information about the formal and informal requirements of graduate school prior to attendance, possibly leading to a decrease in the retention rate of graduate students. The unique needs of a graduate student range from academic to professional and, in many cases, to personal and emotional.

Mental health records for student populations within higher education indicate that about 10% of students are diagnosed with depression, a percentage that does not include those students who are not diagnosed or not actively seeking help. Of surveyed graduate students, 10.7% considered attempting suicide and 2.0% reported that they had attempted suicide 12 months prior to the survey. In other cases, almost half of college students felt overwhelmed on multiple occasions, at least seven or more times during the previous year, and about 28% felt this way 11 or more times a year. These would carry on to affect academics and emotional health (Oswalt & Riddock, 2007).

While many available studies are conducted with a focus on undergraduate student populations, as resources are often focused on the undergraduate population, graduate students face stressors and obstacles that can differ from the traditional undergraduate student (Brandes, 2006). Graduate students face issues such as financial pressures, a lack of family or program support, and a time constraint to finish based on financial or personal needs (Oswalt & Riddock, 2007). Due to such specific needs,
graduate students could benefit from specialized services that are not currently widely available.

Graduate students as a group tend to seek out help more than other groups. Hence, as long as such services are available, graduate students want to obtain the help they need and are less inhibited about asking for services (McCarthy, Bruno, & Sherman, 2010). This could be due to an awareness developed during the undergraduate years of what services a school can provide or due to a higher level of self-awareness and overall maturity. However, among available services, graduate students are more inclined to seek career help than they are to seek alternative forms of counseling, such as personal or academic counseling (Morgan, Ness, & Robinson, 2003).

The factors that prevent graduate students from seeking help create a unique combination that does not necessarily apply to undergraduate students. Undergraduate students do not seek help for various reasons, but it is often because of a lack of knowledge about available services. However, graduate students, typically being older than the average undergraduate, feel time and cost are large factors even if they are familiar and aware of the services available to them. Especially with mental health issues, graduate students do not feel they can seek out the types of emotional counseling and therapy they feel could benefit them, as they are not often provided with health insurance through their school and many cannot work a full-time schedule that allows for work-provided insurance (McCarthy et al., 2010). This could lead to lower rates of retention and poor levels of student success, reducing the overall successful graduate
student population. These external factors, as opposed to internal and personal factors, are limiting graduate students from seeking out important services. It is pivotal to student success that educational institutions aim to provide such services.

**Graduate Student Involvement**

To continue to be successful, involvement in the campus culture is a key component in the graduate student experience (Brandes, 2006). Yet, graduate students report feeling less involved than their undergraduate peers (Smith, 2010). While at the undergraduate level, students often live on campus and are encouraged to join clubs, fraternities and sororities, and other groups affiliated with their campus and community. This can encourage them to feel a stronger connection with their peers and university and leads to higher student satisfaction. Graduate school can be more isolating than the undergraduate experience, with individual research and off-campus living being more common. It is even more prevalent amongst graduate students in the humanities who are not conducting research in a lab, which has similar effects of creating a tight-knit community with a common interest (Brandes, 2006).

Graduate students are able to achieve involvement through socialization with their peers, something that is even more difficult in hybrid and commuter-based programs where the students spend much of their academic time off campus. According to Weidman, Twale, and Stein (2001), socialization of graduate students occurs across four individual stages: anticipatory, formal, informal, and personal. During the anticipatory
stage, the student spends time beginning to learn the new culture of their school. In the formal stage, the student observes the role that graduate students specifically have in this culture. They also learn how they will fit into the culture. Once at the informal stage, graduate students receive behavioral cues from those around them, including their professors and peers. They begin to react to these cues and act according to their cohort and peers. At the final stage, the personal stage, their roles are internalized and they are fully adapted to their program, accepting their new role in this climate and are transformed overall (Weidman et al., 2001).

Involvement in campus activities, as noted by Gardner (2008), is an important way to reduce graduate student attrition rates. Gardner reported that several large factors hinder the experience of a graduate student, factors that can be influenced by gender, race, and age. With various issues that can detract from a positive graduate student experience, schools have to actively accommodate graduate students in ways that are dramatically different than those for the undergraduate population.

A key way to create such involvement is through a designated graduate student center. Such spaces have only been around for 15 years or less, but schools are already finding them to be very effective. Because of the unique needs of graduate students, graduate student centers do not necessarily emphasize a residential component, which differs from many undergraduate student centers that can be found on campus and usually in residence halls. Although there is no specific definition of what a graduate
student space is, it is generally thought of as an area, building, or room dedicated to serving graduate and professional students (Brandes, 2006).

At the University of Rochester (n.d.), there are specific rooms in the school library dedicated to graduate student use. Two out of the seven recommended reading rooms are for graduate students only and are advertised to be quiet places for concentrating. New York University’s library has specific rooms for graduate students that students cannot access without ID cards. Some of these rooms and areas are only available by application, exclusively for doctoral students later on in their graduate career, after they have passed their comprehensive exams (New York University Library, 2014). Probably the most extensive area dedicated to graduate students alone is the Graduate Student Commons at the University of California, Santa Cruz. There are multiple study rooms, which can be reserved in advance for studying, office hours, or meetings. What makes the Graduate Student Commons unique is that it encourages non-academic interaction with the campus, providing graduate students with a common space that includes a kitchen and lounge area. Holiday socials occur regularly, encouraging students to get involved with the campus and connect with other graduate students. The center also hosts professional development programs throughout the year, providing classes to help graduate students seek out jobs after earning their graduate or professional degrees by training them in interview skills and how to make a resume (University of California, Santa Cruz, n.d.).
To create a successful graduate student space, Rempel et al. (2011) recommended a “niche marketing” approach, as seen in many businesses. Schools should first research and recognize the specific needs of their graduate students and, once that is established, create centers that target the needs of the graduate student population. Spaces and services for smaller populations with varying needs can be created specifically for these groups.

**Student Services for Graduate Students**

Student services typically focus more on undergraduate populations and carry their services over to their graduate student populations, as opposed to creating individualized graduate student support. This can be explained by the fact that undergraduate enrollment is often higher than that of graduate students and undergraduate students are undergoing a level of student development that schools feel requires more attention. Also, it is typically assumed that graduate students already understand how to navigate the available resources to find appropriate student services (Pontius & Harper, 2006). Although the numerical population of graduate and undergraduate students is measurable, the level of student development and understanding of student services for graduate students should not be assumed. According to Pontius and Harper, “Previous experience in higher education does not translate to graduate and professional experiences because of differences in graduate and undergraduate education, as well as variations in institutional types” (p. 49).
Like with undergraduate student populations, schools should prioritize the graduate student experience and educate graduate students on what services are available.

According to Blimling and Whitt (1999), good practice when it comes to student affairs should encompass the following:

1. Engages students in active learning
2. Helps students develop coherent values and ethical standards
3. Sets and communicates high expectations for student learning
4. Uses systematic inquiry to improve student and institutional performance
5. Uses resources effectively to achieve institutional missions and goals
6. Forges educational partnerships that advance student learning
7. Builds supportive and inclusive communities. (p. 15)

This should not only apply to undergraduate students but also to graduate student populations, as both could benefit from such principles.

Two primary schools of thought on how student services should be structured can be found among the literature: that services should be centralized, allowing students to access most resources they would need in convenient and contained locations or that services should be decentralized, allowing each department with a unique purpose to specialize resources, including staff, to provide narrower but specialized assistance.

The decentralization of student services logically fits with a model that caters to larger student populations, which include both undergraduates and graduate students, where resources cannot be equally spread. The result in such a case would be that each
student receives does not receive the same amount of time and resources. Instead, this decentralized model allows students to seek out the resources they need at a time when they need them (Burlison, 2010). For example, having a separate admissions advisor, academic advisor, and financial aid advisor specifically for graduate students allows each advisor to specialize and be trained extensively in that service.

The downside to the decentralization of student services is the ease in utilization of such services. With different departments all staffed by different individuals and likely in different rooms and possibly even different buildings, students can easily get overwhelmed. For example, one school may process graduation through their academic advisors, another through the Registrar’s, and yet another through the Admissions office. A student who does not know the structure and role of each department may not know where to direct their questions. A first-generation student or English language learner may not be aware of the types of student services available. This could put such students at a disadvantage. To help a student with this, schools can provide a centralized area of communication. This can ensure that a student knows how to access all the resources available to them and understand the structure of these services (Burlison, 2010).

The structure of student services must accurately cater to the student population, since a model that works successfully for one university may not necessarily work as well for another. Cost effectiveness is a key factor in how services are being used, and a regular assessment of a program should be conducted and analyzed. The analysis is not recommended to occur insularly, but to include the affected parties, such as staff and
students themselves. This also ensures an investment from all groups to most successfully utilize the adapted services (Schuh & Upcraft, 2001).

**Family Influences**

Graduate student studies require a considerable amount of time, whether a student is part-time or full-time. This time is often split between classes, research, and outside work. With this, given that graduate students are often older than their undergraduate counterparts, many are at personal life stages that include families and many are caring for children while simultaneously meeting the demands of student life. However, there is minimal literature regarding the school-life balance and the way it is addressed in graduate student populations. In fact, there is a reported increase of pregnant and parenting students in higher education, but there has not been a measurable increase of resources for these populations (Brown & Nichols, 2012). Graduate students report that if they have children, they are less likely to enter research universities, claiming the difficult work-life balance is a major disincentive. Some unique examples for this population includes struggles with financial insecurity, career uncertainty, short- and long-term timelines, and overall family planning (Oswalt & Riddock, 2007; Springer et al., 2009). The types of struggles can be classified into two prominent categories: structural conflict and subjective perceptions. Structural conflict includes the juggling of time spent between schoolwork and family, issues with finances, and concrete and measurable factors. Subjective perceptions are how the individual interprets stress, their
emotional investment, and other factors, which are more difficult to numerically measure (Edgell, Ammons, & Dahlin, 2011). Both are equally important and need to be researched in the context of the graduate student population in order to better provide for the students.

The majority of doctoral students report feeling between somewhat to very concerned about the family friendliness of their choice in graduate school and programs. Women are especially concerned with this issue, with 84% of women and 74% of men reporting concern in a study by Mason, Goulden, and Frasch (2009). The disparity between men and women when it comes to career and educational expectations can vary based on cultural and personal ideologies. Mothers are often given standards that include a primary focus on motherhood whereas fathers are given standards that are more accepting of having a career or an education as a priority (Edgell et al., 2011). Women reported feeling strongly about the issue of having children and its implications whereas men did not report feeling this as often. They feel they must choose between spending their time as a parent or as a student, as they cannot perform both duties at the same time. They work harder to alter their schedules to incorporate both the student obligations and the familial. Yet, women find they become more isolated from other graduate students based on these altered schedules, often only working in the late evenings and missing time in the afternoon to work with their peers. The opportunity to connect with the campus and become more involved becomes a common sacrifice among student mothers (Gardner, 2008).
When graduate students see few examples of advisors, professors, and mentors going through the struggle of having children while in graduate school, they are unable to envision themselves in a similar role and are not confident in their ability to successfully combine work, school, and a family (Mason et al., 2009). Parents in the workforce and even faculty are given resources and options by which their needs for a work-life balance may be addressed.

In the U.S., maternal or parental leave is only awarded when a company or organization has at least 50 employees and the individual employee has worked for the employer for at least 12 months with at least 1,250 hours immediately preceding the leave. Although many graduate students do work, either through teaching assistant positions, research positions, or other various on- and off-campus jobs, the U.S. Department of Labor requires an average of 24 hours of work a week, which would be expected to be done on top of classes and personal time. If the graduate student does qualify, such leave is still unpaid (U.S. Department of Labor, 2012). The U.S. Department of Education does provide financial assistance to student parents through the Childcare Access Means Parents in Schools grant, which is intended to fund campus-based childcare services. These are specifically for undergraduates, though, and do not apply to graduate students (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Although a positive step for student parents, it still does not benefit or assist graduate student parents. Staff and faculty often utilize the same on-campus childcare services that are available to graduate students, requiring graduate students to compete for placement in daycare.
Individuals can be on waiting lists for on-campus childcare for multiple years, forcing graduate students to find off-campus alternatives (Brown & Nichols, 2012).

With the lack of financial security for graduate student parents, especially those who are expecting children or who have young children, individuals report feeling conflicted with work and family. Those facing the conflict may then choose to stay in school longer, possibly at a slower pace, and sacrifice finding a job or focusing solely on family (Edgell et al., 2011).

Springer et al. (2009) suggested specific steps schools and universities can take to ensure a welcome space for graduate student parents. Support groups, web pages, or even a bulletin board for graduate student parents to seek out one another was found to be helpful. Knowing there is an active community going through similar challenges will improve morale. Parents can post notices for study groups at times that better allow them to work around time spent with their family or even suggest study group babysitting, where parents can study together while pooling in costs for a babysitter to watch multiple children. Counseling or group counseling provided by campus health services should be available, with an emphasis on stress coping strategies. Besides emotional and academic support, physical support must be provided as well. Schools and universities are often able to provide lactation rooms for employees, but these services should also be extended to student parents as well (Springer et al., 2009). Although not required by law, lactation rooms are suggested by the California Department of Public Health. These rooms are encouraged to have breast pumps available to be rented or purchased, a refrigerator for
employees to store breast milk separate from break room refrigerators, a clean sink, and a healthy and private environment, complete with literature and welcoming décor (California Department of Public Health, 2014). Students having access to these rooms means they will be able to freely provide for their newborn children while not sacrificing time away from campus.

**Summary**

Research has shown that graduate students have unique needs when compared to undergraduate students within higher education institutions (Burlison, 2010). Through the development of specific graduate student services, it has been suggested that we may see an increase in graduate student development and overall graduate student retention. Schools can benefit with the designation of graduate student spaces, an increase in mental health services, and an overall emphasis on continued academic support for graduate students. By increasing student engagement and involvement and the application of student development theories, higher education institutions can create more welcome environments for their graduate student populations.
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter highlights the population and sample of the study, the study design, the data collection procedures used, instruments utilized in the data collection procedures, and the approach used in the data analysis. It was the purpose of this study to explore the perceived effects having a family can have on the graduate student experience. The study looked at the types of student services that graduate student parents need to enhance their graduate school experience and complete their degree. This study focused on graduate students caring for children during their graduate program at a 4-year public university in Northern California.

Recently, more research on graduate student parents has become available. However, research into the specific services needed by this population is limited. Many student parents report feeling like they cannot be ideal parents and dedicated academics simultaneously. Under this pressure, they feel the need to choose between parenting and a family-life or school and academics (Springer et al., 2009).

Due to graduate programs seeing smaller populations than undergraduate programs at the same institution, it is not uncommon to see resources that cater largely to undergraduate populations. Graduate students often must seek out help independently and without the same guidance offered to undergraduate students. As graduate students
are often at an older age than typical undergraduate student populations, those with children are often required to juggle a family life and schoolwork, possibly with a part-time or full-time job.

**Setting of the Study**

This study took place at a public 4-year institution located in California. This public California university (henceforth referred to as P.C.U.) has an approximate enrollment of 29,000 students overall, with almost 3,000 graduate students. Of these, about 1,100 graduate students are considered part-time. P.C.U. offers over 70 graduate degrees and is home to a wide variety of student services, including an Academic Advising and Career Center, a Student Organizations and Leadership office, and a Peer and Academic Resource Center.

**Design of the Study**

The study utilized a qualitative research approach. This qualitative research approach is characterized by “its focus on the development of information from the subjects in environments that are not under the researcher’s control” (Cowan, 2007, p. 37). The population for this study was graduate students attending a graduate program at P.C.U. During their time at P.C.U., all students interviewed had children. Six students volunteered to participate in the interview by contacting the researcher (Gibbs & Taylor, 2012).
**Data Collection**

Prior to any data collection, approval from California State University, Sacramento’s Institutional Review Board in addition to the review board of P.C.U was required. Once approved, participation invitations were sent out to a graduate department in P.C.U. that focuses on graduate study as it relates to higher education within the School of Education. Participation was voluntary. The invitations included information about the research and the purposes of the study, explaining that the desired population would include students who had children at the time of their P.C.U. graduate studies. Participants agreed via a consent form to partake in the research (see Appendix A).

**Instrumentation**

All interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants. The researcher conducted all interviews face-to-face in a secure place approved by the participants. Open-ended interview questions (see Appendix B) were presented based on the following topics:

1. Family/Personal background.
2. The individual’s graduate student experience with regard to challenges faced as a student and parent.
3. The individual’s graduate student experience with regard to student services available.
Data Analysis Procedures

All interviews were recorded to ensure the accuracy of data analysis. The interviews were transcribed shortly following the interviews for purposes of data coding and analysis. The nature of the qualitative data allowed for an in-depth explanation of how individuals felt regarding their graduate student experience.

Responses were categorized by themes that were revisited throughout each interview. The data were coded into major themes based on common statements, words, or subjects the participants mentioned in interview answers. The themes were compared against one another to ensure consistent classification, as recommended when coding interview data (Gibbs & Taylor, 2012). Quotes were used to represent various themes to highlight individual examples.

Limitations

Limitations include those due to the study population and those due to the research methods themselves. Because of the small sample size of the study, statistical conclusions about the feelings of graduate students as a whole could not be made. Instead, our results represent the thoughts and perspectives of a portion of graduate students with children at P.C.U.

Another limitation was that the researcher was academically close to some members of the study population, which could have led to an unintentional bias, although precautions were taken to prevent such an occurrence. Individuals were not asked to
participate directly by the researcher, but instead via an email from a third party. All research interviews had names removed during the process of coding all data to ensure no personal bias, and individuals were labeled by participant numbers instead.
Chapter 4
DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Introduction

It was the purpose of this study to explore the perceived effects having a family can have on the graduate student experience. The study looked at the types of student services that graduate student parents need to enhance their graduate school experiences. The impacts of having children while at graduate school were explored to discover the perspective of the current and alumni population within a department of P.C.U. This study aims to educate both graduate students, current, future, or those considering graduate school. With this information, colleges will be able to understand more fully the issues students with families face and provide resources that cater to this specific population. The following research questions were addressed in the study:

1. What types of academic and personal challenges do graduate students face?

2. What types of resources or specialized support do graduate students have access to in a graduate program at P.C.U?

3. How do specialized resources or institutional support meet the graduate student expectations?

4. What do graduate students with families (children) feel their specific needs are when it comes to student services?
5. Do graduate students with families feel their specific needs are being met by their institution?

This chapter covers the results of the interviews conducted for the study. Common themes and trends found in the interviews are addressed to better understand the issues graduate students with children face.

**Presentation of Data**

**Participant Background**

Figure 1 Age of graduate students

Figure 1 highlights the ages the interviewed graduates students were at the time of the study. The interviews consisted of six graduate students at P.C.U., all of which had children. It is apparent that the majority of participants interviewed were between 40 and
49, but it should be noted that one participant chose not to disclose any background information.

Figure 2  Number of children

Figure 2 indicates the number of children each graduate student who was interviewed had. The majority of participants had over one child, with most having two children while attending graduate school. The data were based on the number of children graduate students had at the end of their program, so any born during the obtainment of a graduate degree are included.
Figure 3 illustrates the ages of the children of the graduate student parents. The average age of children was between 10 and 11, but ages ranged from newborn to 20. The majority of children were between 16 and 20, although at least two students were in each age group.
Satisfaction with Student Services

Figure 4  Satisfaction with types of available student services

Figure 4 highlights how 50% of graduate student parents, or three of the six participants, felt unsatisfied with the types of student services available to them as graduate students with children. Only one participant felt satisfied with the services available, and two felt neutral or had no opinion.
Personal and Academic Challenges

Figure 5  Personal and academic challenges faced

Among all challenges mentioned, several particular challenges were repeated by multiple participants. Issues with “scheduling” were mentioned by half of those interviewed, and the guilt caused by splitting time between school and home life was mentioned by half the participants. Other common challenges include finding a balance, prioritizing school, work, and family. Less common challenges were outside factors, such as the academic environment of the program and overall finances while in graduate school, which were each only mentioned once in all the interviews.
Findings and Discussion

Having children while in graduate school requires an extremely high level of commitment, with outside factors, mainly family, being typically time consuming and often prioritized areas of life. Juggling school, family, and possibly work means that graduate students have unique challenges. Several students mentioned feeling unsatisfied with the services provided by the school, focusing on the areas of currently available student services and the major issues with them, such as the balance of priorities and guilt.

Student Services

Many students reported that the available student services did not cover their needs. Participant #1 shared:

I would have liked more communication from the department administrators, the faculty, and the Office of Graduate Studies. Of course I could find the necessary information on my own…however, it would have been so much easier if there were additional services available to help ensure student success.

Despite having the knowledge and ability to successfully navigate graduate school, interview participants felt that the presence of student services could have assisted them in navigating the expectation of graduate school and helped reduce irregular communication.

Figure 4 illustrates how 50% of graduate student parents felt unsatisfied with the types of student services available to them as a graduate student with children. The
findings of this study were supported by the research in which “women reported that they were dissatisfied with department support for career–life balance…[they] argue that there is little ‘systemic help’ for graduate student parents, and that institutional resources are biased toward nonparents” (Springer et al., 2009, p. 440).

When asked what types of services graduate student parents would have liked to see, only a third of students remarked that they did not feel an additional need for specific services. The remaining two thirds answered with specific resources they had wished they had more access to during their graduate program. Participant #6 requested resources to make the best use of limited time, “If there is a student learning center that works with students on identifying their own learning methods and how to make the best use of time using techniques that match up to their learning, this would be very beneficial.” Such resources could allow for more efficient time management, especially for those already struggling with time constraints outside of school.

Participant #1, who did not feel unsatisfied with the available services overall, still felt she could have benefitted from more flexibility in class structure, hoping for an increase in the number of online classes available. She felt that instead of classes on weekends, an online environment would have benefitted her family life immensely.

Scheduling

Three separate participants commented that scheduling was one of the biggest challenges they faced. Some explained that even though they had a spouse equally splitting parenting duties, juggling their portion of parenting duties in addition to
schoolwork and jobs became difficult in terms of scheduling. The use of weekend courses by some programs actually hindered the ability to schedule family time, as weekends were often reserved for family functions. Participant #2 said she was unable to allow her son to play a sport he had wanted to, “I wanted him to play but it would have been his first year playing and I didn’t want to miss his games. His games would have been on Saturdays and I had class every other Saturday.”

**Guilt**

Guilt was another common theme in answers about personal challenges faced as graduate students. Graduate student parents felt guilt when spending time away from family and children. Participant #4 stated, “I also felt tremendous guilt that I wasn’t spending as much time with my family and I missed out on many games and events on the weekends when we have class.” Detore-Nakamura (2003) found similar results that this feeling is not uncommon with graduate student parents, with parents saying “I feel guilt for my self-indulgence and for my neglect of my daughter, even if it is for ten minutes” (p. 57). The guilt was commonly due to less time available to spend with family and having to find alternative means of childcare, such as nearby family, which added an additional perceived burden on the graduate student’s support system.

**Balance and Priorities**

Learning how to balance and prioritize schoolwork and life was a challenge mentioned by five of the six participants. One student interviewed explained, “I do not want to miss important times in my family’s lives and that balance is difficult.” Another
participant said, “Balancing time amongst the many commitments I had as a mother, working professional, and graduate student was among the greats challenges.” This was highlighted in the literature by Rempel et al. (2011) and graduate students claimed they were unable to find time for all their different obligations. These were not skills taught through available programs at the university, and the students felt they had to work through their challenges on their own.

Although graduate students are an important population for universities, the resources are not often adequate for providing them with the services they need. This study helps clarify what graduate student parents felt in regard to the current state of graduate programs, specifically at P.C.U., and how these programs could better service these students. Brown and Nichols (2012) explained that student parents have needs that must be addressed by the administration: “In spite of the “invisible” nature of this population, it is vitally important to create programs and policies geared towards pregnant and parenting students” (p. 505).

Summary

Chapter 4 presented the findings of the qualitative study using interviews from graduate student parents. The results of the study provide insight into how graduate student parents go through graduate school while maintaining their familial responsibilities. Many felt frustrated with the services available at P.C.U. and wanted additional support and guidance to assist with the stress of balancing schoolwork and
home life as well as the guilt associated with having priorities split between schoolwork and family life.
Chapter 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

Many graduate students are returning to school after their undergraduate study after a pause in their education, possibly to work or start a family. When they return to graduate school, they are faced with the task of balancing their current life with work and family and incorporating the new priority of graduate school. Many parents are concerned that they are not able to be a dedicated academic and handle the responsibility of parenting simultaneously. They begin to feel as if they have to choose between the two (Springer et al., 2009).

To address this issue, the study researched, using a qualitative approach, how graduate student parents want these challenges to be met and what types of student services could benefit them. The following research questions were addressed in the study:

1. What types of academic and personal challenges do graduate students face?
2. What types of resources or specialized support do graduate students have access to in a graduate program at P.C.U.?
3. How do specialized resources or support from their institution meet graduate student expectations?
4. What do graduate students with families (children) feel their specific needs are when it comes to student services?

5. Do graduate students with families feel their specific needs are being met by their institution?

Six individuals shared their experiences and answered questions about the challenges faced while in graduate student. They were also interviewed about the satisfaction they felt with the student services provided and what services they desired. Half the students felt dissatisfied with the services available, feeling they were not given the resources to handle the transition from parent to student parent. One participant wished for a dedicated administrative professional to provide specialized resources and to act as a point of contact between the department and the students. This could alleviate the problems faced with regard to communication and expectations. Half the students felt guilt in having to split their time and many struggled with balancing their new obligations with their parental duties.

Conclusions

From the results of this study, an understanding of the struggles that graduate student parents face could lead to the development of specialized services and resources for graduate student parents. Academically, graduate student parents do not feel supported and feel that they were not given the tools to successfully navigate through this experience. With half the students feeling unsatisfied with the available student services,
the need for better resources at P.C.U. is apparent. “Only through understanding both the needs of pregnant and parenting students and implementing innovative policy and programmatic designed to facilitate academic success can this issue be resolved” (Brown & Nichols, 2012, p. 528). To increase overall student development, it is critical to listen to graduate students and understand their specific needs.

**Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, three major recommendations can be made. First, universities should aim to provide counseling services for their graduate student populations. Many students expressed feeling guilt and stress associated with their graduate careers and could benefit from discussing these feelings with a dedicated mental health professional. If these resources are made available through the university, graduate students will not be faced with the financial burden of seeking out health services on their own.

Another recommendation would be to provide graduate students with training in time management skills. This could benefit the graduate student in many aspects of his or her life, in areas of student development but also in professional and personal development. By learning specific time management strategies, student parents can better utilize school time while allowing for more time at home and with the family.

The final recommendation would be a call for better communication between the departments and the students. These communication improvements can be in the form of
improved technology or through a dedicated administrative professional to aid in communication. This improvement in communication, regardless of how it is carried out, should be prioritized and dedicated solely to graduate students and not shared with undergraduate populations. When shared, the needs of the largest population are often the first to be considered, which will usually be undergraduate populations. Graduate students need dedicated resources exclusively for them so their needs are put first.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the results of the study, future research with more targeted interview questions could be useful. Questions asking about what available services during the student’s undergraduate careers were beneficial could have provided a comparable example for success. The results of the study could also have been further analyzed by gender, as the research showed that males and females can perceive their roles as parents differently, and their priorities once attending graduate school may also be different based on these roles. Do graduate student fathers find it easier to prioritize schoolwork compared to graduate student mothers? The results could also have been analyzed by area of study, as students in the humanities may have varying experiences when compared to those in the sciences, based on the different types of programs.

The researcher intended for this study to increase the awareness of the unique struggles of graduate student parents and hopes that this has brought light to some of their struggles.
APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

Letter of Informed Consent

Student Services Available to Graduate Students with Children and Families

You are invited to participate in a research study. It is the purpose of this study to explore the perceived effects, positive and/or negative, that having a family, specifically children for the purposes of this study, living with the person part time or full time, can have towards the graduate student experience, specifically looking at the current and alumni population in the Sacramento State University Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Department.

This study aims to educate both graduate students, either current, future, or those considering the Sacramento State University EDLP graduate program, as well as schools and colleges that aim to encourage graduate students into similar programs. With this information, colleges will be able to understand more fully the issues that students with families face and provide resources that cater to this specific population.

My name is Hani Rahman, and I am a graduate student at California State University, Sacramento (CSUS), Educational Leadership and Policy Studies (EDLP) Department. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because of your enrollment or previous enrollment as a graduate student at the CSUS EDLP department.

If you decide to participate, you will be participating in a voluntary interview, which will be confidential and recorded. All recordings and further transcripts and data will be kept confidential. Interviews will last approximately 45 minutes, but not exceed 60 minutes. You will be asked four (4) questions aiming to allow you, the participant, to provide information about your experience as a graduate student with CSUS EDLP department while having children and/or families. Through the questions, you will be asked to focus on your experience as it relates to student services that are or are not available. Once the interviews have been transcribed, you will be given the opportunity to review the transcription data.

Through the design of the student, any and all risks, including physical, economic, and sociological, to participants have been minimized. Strict confidentiality of participant information and data will be honored. There are some benefits to this research, particularly that individuals will benefit from this study through an opportunity to express their experiences with student services at their institution. Society will benefit by contributing new information to the existing literature studying graduate student success. Individuals may also indirectly or directly benefit from any future changes to programs or the creation of services for graduates students with children and families.
If you have any questions about the research at any time, please call me at 510-709-5585 or email me at hcrahman@gmail.com. You may also contact the primary advisor for this research study, Dr. Jose Chavez at chavez@csus.edu or the secondary advisor, Dr. Ausaf Rahman at [redacted]. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in a research project please call the Office of Research Affairs, California State University, Sacramento, (916) 278-5674, or email irb@csus.edu.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Measures to insure your confidentiality are: all names and identifying characteristics will be removed from the study. All files, including interview recordings, transcripts of interviews, and data will individually password protected and encrypted. The data obtained will be maintained in a safe, locked location and will be destroyed after a period of three years after the study is completed.

Your participation is entirely voluntary and your decision whether or not to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you willingly agree to participate, that you may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled, that you will receive a copy of this form, and that you are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies.

You will be offered a copy of this signed form to keep.

Signature                                                     Date
____________________________________________________________________  ___________________________________
APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

1. What types of academic and personal challenges related to your experience within the EDLP department do/did you, as a graduate student with children, face when it comes to being a student?

2. What types of student services do you feel could be provided by the EDLP department that would benefit your education, as a graduate student with children?

3. Do/did you feel satisfied/unsatisfied with the types of student services available to you from the EDLP department, as a graduate student with children? Why?
REFERENCES


University of California, Santa Cruz. (n.d.). *Graduate student commons*. Retrieved from https://gradcommons.soe.ucsc.edu/about
