Asking the Experts: Investigating Parent Needs for Child and Family Services on Campus

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Abstract

Parents on campus are faced with too few spaces for child care, and no accessible family services. Student-, staff-, and faculty- parents at UBCO participated in interviews and focus groups and provided information regarding their needs for child care and family services on campus. Parents’ priorities in order of importance were (a) more child care spaces to meet the needs of those on campus, (b) increased resources for parents provided within a parenting centre, (c) a welcoming atmosphere for families through family housing and increased recreational opportunities, and (d) sustainable management of child and family services to ensure success. Recommendations are made to enhance the livability of campus in order to create an environment that meets the needs of all members of the campus community.
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Appendix A: The Demographic Survey / 21
Throughout the Central Okanagan there is a dire need for accessible child care and family services. Indeed, child care spaces have the capacity to serve only 22% of the children between the ages of 0 and 6 who reside in the Central Okanagan (Community Action Toward Children’s Health (CATCH), 2006). This is countered by the fact that in 2001 nearly 60% of mothers were in the work force and additional mothers were pursuing the education (Statistics Canada, 2007).

Currently, the daycare at the University of British Columbia – Okanagan (UBCO) campus provides full-time and part-time child care for approximately 45 families in total. These spaces are not sufficient to meet current demand. There are 54 individuals waiting for an infant/toddler space (ages 6-36 months) and an additional 35 individuals waiting for a 3-5 year-old space. These numbers predict an average wait time of approximately a year and a half for a part time space (personal communication, Baran, April 14, 2007). Given that by 2010 the university is targeting an increase in student count to 7500 from the current 4000 (Heathcote, 2006; Swallow, 2007) and an expected increase of 40 faculty members in a single year (University of British Columbia, 2004) it is clear the demand will increase.

Although UBCO lies at the very heart of the Central Okanagan and is a part of the community in which it resides, UBCO has unique characteristics when compared to the Okanagan community that affect the needs of parents on campus.

First, the University is geographically isolated from community services and merchants, making access to services and merchants difficult. The geographic isolation is exacerbated by the fact that students, staff, and faculty are drawn from an extremely large geographic region:
from Salmon Arm in the North to Osoyoos in the South (approximately 235 kilometres).

Together with the fact that child and family services and accessibility to such services differ among communities up and down the valley, these characteristics point to a clear need for UBCO to provide access to the services that parents need in order to enhance the growth in the numbers of students, faculty, and staff.

A second factor unique to UBCO when compared to the greater Okanagan community is the characteristics of families the university serves. Student-parents are present in nearly every program offered at UBCO and their class schedules are more variable than that of parents who work. Variable class schedules in addition to responsibilities for children allow little time to find and use community resources, though the services could ease the time pressures that student-parents experience (Home, 1998). It follows that there is a need for child and family services on campus for student-parents to access as their time allows.

Third, evidence suggests that mothers who are also faculty-members require the support of child care and family services on campus to ease the conflicting pressures of family and academia (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004a). Findings from qualitative interviews of thirty women faculty at nine research universities in the US suggest that many faculty mothers have considered leaving their employed positions in order to be more available to their children (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004a). Moreover, the fact that women who have children soon after achieving their Ph.D. are less likely than other women to achieve tenure (Williams, 2004; Mason & Goulden, 2004; Finkel & Olswang, 1996) may repel women who want to have children from entering the academic field (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004b). Indeed, universities and colleges are struggling to recruit and retain faculty and staff (Boswell, 2003). It follows that a more family-friendly campus climate would contribute to the university’s ability to attract and retain talented faculty
and allow them to pursue both their career and family goals (Mason & Goulden, 2004; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004a; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004b).

A more family-friendly atmosphere and increased child care would aid in meeting the unique needs of parents on campus. On campus child care is able to offer parents conveniently located, good quality education for their children while at the same time contribute to increased student success (Boswell, 2003). The provision of child care on campus has been linked to higher graduation rates of student-parents. For example, a study conducted by the State University of New York, found that graduation rates were higher for student-parents when child care was provided (as cited in Boswell, 2003). Moreover, given that psychological distress has been found to be the most important factor in the academic success of student-mothers (Quimby & O’Brien, 2006) and that lack of quality, affordable child care contributes to the distress of parents, it follows that child care on campus should contribute to enhanced academic success. Enhanced academic success clearly contributes to the success of an institution and, in turn, to its potential for growth. UBCO plans to create an additional 3,500 student spaces, and to mount additional graduate programs including a medical program. Graduate programs attract older students, who are more likely to have families (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). It follows that an increasing population of students with children will increase the demand for child care and family services on campus. Therefore, to increase the likelihood that student-parents will continue their studies or return to attain higher levels of education at UBCO, more quality, affordable child care spaces need to be created.

UBCO has the unique opportunity of being a young University with the potential to create a vibrant, sustainable, and livable community for all UBCO members. Stepping up to meet the demands of parents working and studying on campus would allow UBCO to compete in a
global marketplace and excel at being a role-model in child service delivery for the region, the province, and the country. The present study provides an insight into the needs of parents on campus and creative ways to ensure the accessibility, sustainability, and success of child services on campus. In addition, recommendations emerging from the priorities cited by parents are provided.

Method

Participants

Twenty-four individuals who were students, staff, or faculty at UBCO participated in the current study. Sixteen participants were student-parents, while eight were employee-parents. The difference in participation rate is due to the research first targeting the recruitment of student-parents; therefore employee-parents had less opportunity to participate. The sample was primarily women (N = 19).

Procedure

Participants were recruited through online study sign-up, email newsletters, posters on campus, and word of mouth. Participants had the choice of participating in an interview or a focus group. Semi-structured techniques for interviews and focus groups were chosen to allow for the greatest amount of relevant information to be provided by the participants. Interviews were one-on-one, whereas focus groups were comprised of 2 - 3 participants per group. Having both methods of data collection provided maximum flexibility for parents to participate in the research. It is important to note that participants were divided nearly equally between the two modes of participation, with thirteen participants choosing interviews and eleven choosing a focus group. This division between the two data collection forms was true also of the sub-
samples of students and employees; nine students chose interviews and seven chose focus groups, while four employees chose interviews and four chose focus groups.

The questions provided to participants in both the interviews and the focus groups were the same. The questions were: (a) What child services should be available at UBC-O? (b) What would make it easy for parents to access the child services on campus? (c) Who would have access to the child services on campus? (d) How would the child services on campus be operated, managed, and coordinated? And (e) Once the child services are available on campus how would we know they are successful?

Interviews and focus groups were audio-taped which provided the interviewer the ability to focus solely on participants’ responses and ask follow-up questions easily. The data were later transcribed by the interviewer.

Participants also had the opportunity to complete an anonymous demographic survey following their participation. See Appendix A for the demographic survey.

Analysis

Interview and focus group content was transcribed from the digital audio files, then analyzed and interpreted using latent content analysis (as described in Mayan, 2001). This technique is inductive and allows the emergence of primary themes through identifying, coding, and categorizing the data rather than the themes being imposed prior to the collection and analysis of the data.

Results

From the analysis of the transcripts arose four major themes with several sub-themes. The themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data are organized as four topics: (a) child care,
(b) resources for parents (c) welcoming atmosphere for families, and (d) use, management, and success of child services on campus. Results from the demographic survey are also included.

Theme 1: Child care

Participants indicated their first priority for services on campus was more child care spaces. The child care theme consists of the types of child care spaces needed, suggestions for easing access to child care, and expectations for operation of the child care services.

Types of Spaces.

The top two forms of child care requested was full-time care and drop-in care. Full-time care was in great demand by parents on campus, similar to parents throughout the Central Okanagan (CATCH, 2007). Drop in care was in greater demand by student- than employee-parents. Drop-in care was most often seen as a time- and cost-efficient way of managing student schedules and finances. It was seen as a safe and reliable place to drop-off children in order to allow a student to attend a class, go to the library, or attend office hours. This service was also requested during exam weeks, as student exams often do not fall on regularly scheduled class days when child care is regularly scheduled.

Employee-parents reported drop-in care would allow them greater ability to attend public lectures and irregularly scheduled meetings. The drop-in child care was viewed as a short-term emergency service and indeed many participants suggested there should be a limit to the amount of hours per week an individual could access this service. Some parents expected increased drop-in spaces in a full-time facility, while others expected an area or facility exclusively for drop-in care.

Ease of access.
Parents reported that enough child care spaces to meet the demand would make child care easy to use.

While employee-parents reported that the regular operating hours of 7:30-5:30 met their needs, student-parents requested evening hours to accommodate children when parents attended evening courses.

Year-round service was in greater demand by employee-parents than student-parents because employee-parents work through the summer. Student-parents reported that interest for summer child care spaces should be surveyed because services may need to be scaled back due to reduced demand. In order to sustain services through the summer it was suggested that the child care facility should keep student spaces over the summer for a deposit and offer summer out-of-school programs to fill the empty spaces.

While most participants indicated the need to keep child care fees down to keep the service accessible, everyone reported there should be user fees associated with child care. There were many suggestions of how to keep parent fees down. Many suggested volunteer hours in exchange for lower fees. There was also an emphasis by student-parents on the importance of the child care facility on campus to accept government child care subsidies. Another suggestion was having parent fees be based on income. In contrast, there was an awareness and concern among some participants regarding the low wages and inability to retain qualified Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) working in the field.

Lastly, individuals expressed the need for the on-campus child care facility to be only accessible for students, staff, and faculty of UBC-O. It was suggested that having a child care facility that would meet the demands on campus could be used as a tool for recruiting staff and faculty.
**Operation of child care.**

Participants expected that a full-time, on-campus child care facility must abide by provincial licensing guidelines and practices. Indeed, it was expected the facility should be of exceptional educational quality because of the university location.

An exclusively drop-in child care facility often was not seen as necessarily a licensed facility. Many individuals expressed that individuals providing short-term drop-in care would need to be screened by having a criminal record check, experience with children, and references, but not need to be an ECE.

UBCO campus daycare was seen as ideal for creating practicum placements for Education, Nursing, or ECE students. Also reported was that parents should have the opportunity to play a variety of roles in the operation of the child care facility. Volunteer roles, such as helping during a field trip were most often reported, while providing food and toys to the facility and having an advisory role on the daycare board were also mentioned. Most parents agreed that volunteer positions should not be mandatory because not everyone has the capability to donate equal amounts of time to a child care facility. Research at the child care facility was supported, as long as the research was deemed ethical and parents had consented to such research being conducted.

*Theme 2: Resources for parents*

Resources for parents was the second priority identified. The theme of resources for parents consisted of a parenting centre and ideas around easing access to a parenting centre.

*Parenting Centre.*

Largely, parents want a parenting centre located on campus, which would provide a child-friendly environment where parents could spend time with their family, as well as
accommodate feeding, breastfeeding, and diaper-changing. The parenting centre should be a comfortable place to meet and interact with other parents. The centre should provide information about resources available on campus and in the community, particularly child care referrals, information about subsidy applications, and scholarship availability for student-parents. Along with providing a safe and supportive environment to talk and learn about parenting and child development with other parents, the centre should provide parenting workshops and access to professionals, such as health nurses. In addition, many parents suggested the availability of on-campus counseling with a focus on work-life/study-life balance as well as parenting.

*Ease of access.*

The idea of a parenting centre was viewed as a free service for parents and their families. While it was recognized that access to professionals would likely be restricted to regular work hours, the possibility of evening appointments was recommended. However, a space for parents and children was expected to be available whenever the campus was open. Due to lack of time as a major stressor in their lives, services which are not accommodating to busy schedules should be avoided where possible. A central bulletin board or an online forum listing information about services in addition to having the ability to post ideas, questions, and requests for support is an example of services which would not impinge on an already busy schedule.

The preference of location of a parenting centre was within a student service-type of building. There was also discussion of adding a place for parents and children to a student commuter-lounge, which is a place for those who do not live on campus to study, prepare a meal, or catch a nap.

Easier access to information was seen as a primary way to make people aware of all the child services available on campus. Indeed, while many students reported knowledge of the
daycare on campus and the long waitlist, many were unaware of its location, age-group of children attending care, cost of the child care, or what services are available. Posters on bulletin-boards, emails, and the UBC-O website were indicated as the easiest way of finding out about services.

Theme 3: Welcoming Atmosphere for Families

A welcoming atmosphere for families was the third priority. The theme of a welcoming atmosphere for parents consisted of increased facilities and activities that are accommodating to families and ideas to easily access the facilities and activities.

*Family-friendly facilities and activities.*

Participants indicated that children should feel welcome, and that meant increasing the visibility of families on campus. To create this welcoming atmosphere, parents suggested having family housing, more healthy food choices, and access to outdoor playground facilities. Respondents also recommended family event-days on campus, which would be organized around a meal and would provide networking opportunities. Opening the campus up to the broader community through increased recreation activities and programs was also requested and seen as beneficial for the university by increasing the public awareness of UBCO.

Some individuals felt that simply utilizing existing facilities already on campus at greater capacity - on weekends, during reading break, and in the summer would be adequate. Many others indicated a need for additional facilities, particularly pool facilities on campus. Programs for families would encourage family members to engage in activities together, an example is a family fitness program, rather than parents participating in an activity while children were being cared for elsewhere. Employee-parents also suggested the option for increased flexible schedules which would allow involvement in children’s appointments as well as the ability to come back to
work part-time after having a baby. The accommodations for employee-parents would increase the support for parents working on campus.

*Ease of use.*

Family housing was recommended to be limited to students, staff, and faculty and accessible year-round to provide stability for children and their families. However, playgrounds, events, activities, and programs were seen as being open to the public. Participants suggested yearly memberships for programs based on campus with fees based on the numbers of activities and programs of involvement, similar to the YW-YMCA fee structure.

*Theme 4: Use, Management, and Success of Child Services on Campus*

The last theme discussed by participants regarded the logistics of implementing child and family services on campus. Parents discussed why they would use the services, expectations of management, and how to gauge the success of services after implementation.

*Why parents would use services on campus.*

Primarily, parents indicated that they would use the child and family services on campus for convenience, as families would require fewer transportation and time resources to transport family members. In addition, they felt that having their children on campus would help them be more involved with their family and aid in their relationship with their children. The support services were likely to be used because parents were unable to access them elsewhere due to lack of time and accessibility.

*Managing and governing of child services.*

Participants wanted UBCO involved in the daycare on campus, though the amount of suggested involvement varied. Responses were split equally between having the services run by the university and having the university partner with a not-for profit society to operate the
services. Parents who championed UBCO operated services suggested it would be in the university’s best interest to provide the child and family services.

Parents who had concerns about the university exclusively running the services supported a not-for-profit society as a partner with the university. Parent concerns revolved around the university wanting to profit from services that should not necessarily make a profit. In addition, individuals did not want to see the child services drop down the priority list, particularly when it came to budget allocations. Furthermore, it was noted that not-for-profit societies often are able to access government grants, or money from charities such as United Way to support the service, which in turn, could reduce fees. Lastly, there were concerns of not being responsive to parent needs if it were solely run as a part of the university. A partnership between the university and a not-for-profit society saw UBC-O donating space and providing support with facilities, while the society managed the day-to-day operation of the child care services. This relationship would allow a high level of responsiveness to parent needs and concerns.

There was much discussion about where the child and family services would fit within the UBCO organization. Largely participants reported that child services should have its own department or office in order to remain an essential service and for the services to be coordinated together. Others saw child services fitting with student services or facilities management. Participants suggested that a coordinator of child services should be hired in order for the child services to be aligned with extra activities and events on campus.

How to gauge the success of child and family services.

Participants reported that parent satisfaction should be the primary judgment of whether or not the services were successful. Questionnaires, surveys, and interviews were suggested as ways to gauge parent satisfaction. Questions should include which services were used, likes and
dislikes of the services, levels of happiness of children, and what parents would want to see improved.

In addition, parents recommended that UBCO and additional funders of the services, should have a say in the level of success the services achieve. Parents reported that the university’s ability to retain students, staff, and faculty would be a useful measure of success from UBCO’s perspective.

Lastly, participants suggested measuring age-related competencies of children, measuring changes in coping in parents on campus, and measuring changes in impressions of families and children on campus before and after services have been implemented. The idea behind these measurements was to assess changes in children, parents, and the general campus population to ensure positive trends following implementation of child services on campus. In turn, positive trends should aid the finding and securing of additional funding.

There was overwhelming agreement that the services did not have to be profitable in order to be successful, though they were expected to break even. Advantages of offering child services were predicted to include the attraction of more students, staff, and faculty to the UBCO community as well as increased contentment of current members of the UBCO community.

Participants suggested that it would take more than one year to gauge the success of the services due to timelines involved in parents becoming aware of new services and learning how to access them. Ensuring people know of the services availability was seen as a primary factor in the success of the services.

Demographic Survey

An optional demographic survey was filled out by all participants except one. The average age of participants was 34, and the range of age of participants was between 24 and 45
years. The majority of individuals \((N = 14)\) had 2 children in their care, while 7 participants were caring for 1 child. The majority of children in the families sampled were between the ages of 3 and 5 years old \((N = 17)\), and an additional 15 children were over the age of 5. Ten children were between the ages of 0 and 36 months of age. Primarily, participants in the sample were married \((N = 15)\). A majority of individuals had European origins \((N = 14)\), though there were individuals who indicated First Nations, Metis, Asian, and Spanish origins of ancestors. The mode of gross family income was over $95,000. This contrasts with the fact that the median family income was between $45,000 and $54,999. Participants lived across the Central Okanagan region, as well as in Vernon and Penticton.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to determine parent needs on campus as well as to generate ideas surrounding accessibility, sustainability, and success of child services implemented on campus. Child care, resources for parents, and a welcoming community for families were parents’ top priorities for services on the UBC-O campus.

Although the current study involved a relatively small sample of 24 participants, the data converge with ideas generated from other regional research involving a sample of 118 families \(\text{(CATCH, 2007)}\). The CATCH report was compiled after a three-year, community-driven process of discovering and assessing the needs of parents in the Central Okanagan \(\text{(2007)}\). CATCH found that parents’ top priorities were more access to stable and affordable child care options, followed by the development of central places in communities designed to meet family needs, and finally civic planning that enhances the livability and inclusiveness of our communities. Similarly, the findings of the current study found the priorities of parents on campus were more accessible child care spaces, increased resources for parents through a parenting centre, followed
by the creation of a welcoming atmosphere for families, and lastly sustainable use and management of the services to ensure success. The convergence of the findings suggest the data can be validly generalized to the larger population of parents on campus, as well as to the larger Central Okanagan community.

The results of the current study provide the foundation for proposals which will meet criteria for community and provincial funds. For example, Success by 6®, a provincially sponsored funding agency, will provide funding for new programs and services that address the priorities of the Central Okanagan community (personal communication, Ellison, March 20, 2007). To capitalize on funding available in the community, it is recommended that UBCO submit a proposal for the implementation of services which meet the priorities established by community members. The themes reported by parents in the current study provide the ideal framework for creating a proposal which would meet eligibility requirements set out by funding agencies.

In addition, the British Columbia Minister of State for Child Care, Honourable Linda Reid, has suggested that there may be provincial funds available to organizations wishing to create an integrated child service model, in which child care would be a corner-stone (personal communication, Reid, April 11, 2007). Reports suggest (The Reid Report, 2007) that the availability of provincial funds for enhanced child services will require that a facility offer more than child care and that it include services that interact to enhance one another and the surrounding community, as well as meet the needs of parents. The themes that arose from the current study can be easily brought together to create a holistic family service centre providing a wealth of services which meet the needs of families on campus. In addition, the centre would have the ability to provide important links and build beneficial relationships between the UBCO
community and services provided in the greater Okanagan region. Creating a holistic family service centre with links to the Okanagan community would fulfill requirements laid by the provincial government as well as provide needed services for families on campus and contribute to enhancing the recruitment of the university.

An example of a holistic on campus family service centre is at the University of Toronto. The University of Toronto has a comprehensive Family Care Office which has been in existence since 1993 (Family Care Office, 2007). The office is comprehensive in that it includes information, support, and services on campus for parents, assistance for faculty families relocating, as well as information and programs for those caring for aging family members. Some of the daycares affiliated with the Family Care Office also offer slightly lower fees for students as compared to fees incurred by employees at the University of Toronto. Considering other university models of child care and child services on campus is recommended as the successes and failures experienced by other universities will provide UBCO with an advantage when implementing on campus child care and family services.

Plans for enhanced child services must account for the fact that demographics of regions change with time. Indeed, projections from the Interior Health Authority are that by 2012, the population of children between the ages of 0 and 4 will increase by more than 15%, whereas the population of children between the ages of 5 and 9 years of age will increase by only 5%. This is in contrast to children between the ages of 10 and 14 years old, showing an overall population decline of just nearly 6% (Interior Health, 2006). The Interior Health projections converge with the findings of the current study as the primary need reported by parents was child care which serves children between the ages of 0 and 6. It is recommended that a similar assessment of parent needs for child and family services on campus be conducted every 2-3 years, as children’s
care needs change rapidly – from infant/toddler care to 3-5 year old care to after-school care. Regular assessment of family needs will ensure that services are consistently meeting the needs of parents on campus.

Taken together the findings from the current study reveal that parents who are a part of the UBCO community seek enhanced livability of the UBC-O campus community. Child care, resources for parents, and a welcoming atmosphere would collectively contribute to a campus community supportive of all members at UBC-O. This set of priorities easily map on to the goals and objectives of UBC in their Trek 2010 Vision, for example, “ensuring that UBC is accessible,” “intensifying efforts to recruit, retain, and develop the best people,” and “developing opportunities for community involvement and collaboration.” In turn, by meeting goals of the trek 2010 vision, UBC-O will enhance perception of the university’s contribution to the regional community as well as encourage the future success of our next global citizens.
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Appendix A

The Demographic Survey
Demographic Survey

Asking the experts: Investigating student-parent needs for child services on campus

All of the following questions are optional. Please answer only those that you feel comfortable with. All information will remain anonymous.

1. What is your postal code? _________
2. What is your age? ________
3. Are you male or female? _________
4. How many children are in your care? ______
5. What age is/are the child/children in your care? (Please check all that apply)
   - Prenatal
   - 0-18 Months
   - 18 Months-36 Months
   - 3-5
   - Over 5
6. What is your marital status? (Please circle one)
   - single
   - common-law
   - engaged
   - married
   - divorced
   - other
7. What are the ethnic or cultural origins of your ancestors? (For example, Chinese, Scottish, East Indian, Metis, etc.)? ________________________________
8. What is your total family gross (before taxes and deductions) income/financial support over one year? (Please circle one)
   - <$15,000
   - $15000-$24999
   - $25000-$34999
   - $35000-$44999
   - $45000-$54999
   - $55000-$64999
   - $65000-$74999
   - $75000-$84999
   - $85000-$94999
   - $95000+

When you have finished with this survey please fold it and insert it into the sealed box provided. The box will remain sealed until all of the interviews and focus groups have been completed in order to ensure anonymity.