

Thesis Proposal

Working Title

Supporting Student Mothers: A Study of Well-being, Challenges, and Resource Accessibility at

Brigham Young University

Project Purpose

The purpose of this project is to paint a complete picture of the student mom experience at BYU. It will place emphasis on the well-being of student mothers and how that might be impacted by the lack of resources they have available. A student mother is defined as any woman who has one or more children dependents while attending Brigham Young University (BYU) as full or part-time students. By centering my project on the importance of student mothers in the BYU campus community, I hope to bring awareness to faculty and students about the unique challenges they face. I strongly believe that my project could inform changes on campus to improve the lives of student mothers and parents.

Project Importance

The number of mothers on United States campuses is rising, and BYU is no exception (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2020). BYU student mothers continue to struggle physically, mentally, financially, and academically on campus each day, and there is very little awareness of what, if any, resources might be available to them (Augustine et al., 2018; Kensinger & Minnick, 2017; Madden, 2019). The strength and perseverance of these students inspire me, and I am compelled to help them in any way I can. In a class I took during the 2024 winter semester, a group of students and I noted the large number of student mothers on BYU's campus and wanted to dedicate our class project to them. In a conference presentation poster titled "Empowering Student Mothers: A Study on Well-Being and Campus Satisfaction,"

presented at the most recent Mary Lou Fulton conference, we found a significant positive correlation between satisfaction with campus resources and perceived campus belonging, which highlighted the importance of increasing resource availability on BYU's campus.

While the results we found in our presentation were exciting, they were incomplete. Working under the constraints of time, it was not possible for me to paint a full picture of the student mom experience at BYU or how best the on-campus community might assist them. I hope that exploring this topic within the confines of BYU might put greater awareness and knowledge into the hands of individuals equipped to assist in greater resource accessibility and promotion on campus. I also hope that it will assist students like myself in understanding the student mom experience and what we can do to help the student mothers around us. The presence of student mothers at BYU is invaluable and their success will speak volumes about BYU's campus and educational system. This topic is of great importance for the success of future mothers at BYU and the stability of their education system.

Project Overview

Background

Over the past several decades, the picture of a typical student population at a U.S. college has changed drastically. Now more than ever, campuses throughout the United States have diversified, representing hundreds of racial, cultural, religious, generational, gender, and disabled backgrounds. While the scientific community has experienced a flood of research on many of these unique backgrounds, one group in particular has not received the attention they deserve: student mothers. According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research (2020), of an estimated 3.8 million (22% of all) undergraduate student parents, roughly 70% of them are mothers. Further, in a 2002 statistical analysis report, Horn et al. reported that 73% of women enrolled in

community colleges were mothers. While exact statistics remain unexplored on the BYU campus, it can be reasonably supposed that the student body at BYU follows this same trend.

Despite the increasing number of student mothers on college campuses, their outlook for secondary education success is bleak. According to Hoachlander et al. (2003), 70% of student parents enrolled in a community college with one or more children, 90% of whom are mothers, fail to receive their degree within six years of enrollment. The primary barrier to the success of student mothers is the lack of financial resources, with many student mothers reporting a need for student loans to cover the costs of non-school-related burdens, such as childcare (Kensinger & Minnick, 2017). This suggests that colleges may still need to be equipped to facilitate the success of this unique population, despite their growing numbers.

Student mothers function in an especially unique position due to the increased number of responsibilities they must juggle. Indeed, student mothers have to play the role of mother, college student, home-keeper, and often employee, which contributes to significant physical and emotional labor for these individuals (Madden, 2019). Augustine et al. (2018) note persistent self-reports of extreme fatigue among these mothers, very likely resulting from the increased number of roles they must juggle in comparison to non-parents.

Given student mothers' unique challenges, it is reasonable to suggest that they need increased resources to facilitate their success. However, many student parents struggle with barriers to accessible resources, such as childcare, on their college campuses (Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Madden, 2019). While BYU Preschool, promoted by the Child and Family Studies Laboratory, exists as a form of childcare on BYU's campus, access to one childcare facility is far from the norm in a university setting. Campuses such as Utah Valley University and the University of Utah have more than one childcare facility on-campus, providing care for

infants as young as 6 weeks old. With BYU preschool being the only childcare facility on campus and a 4-year-old age requirement for participation, this excludes many parents from having access to reliable, proximate, and affordable childcare. In the Fall 2023 semester, BYU reported 32,095 undergraduate students. Using the Institute for Women's Policy Research's (2020) statistics, of the 32,095 total undergraduate students, it may be supposed that roughly 4,942 of them are mothers, all presumably in need of child care. Surely, one childcare facility on campus cannot be enough to support these women's needs. In a Title IX declaration, BYU states, "several resources [are] available to students to support them as they balance school and family life." However, among the students that need this support most (student mothers), limited documented resources are available for student mothers within the campus community. Thus, further exploration into the resources available at BYU, as well as the needs of student mothers, is warranted.

Additionally, Madden (2019) reported that the unique dual responsibilities of student mothers expose them to an environment of resistance and inaccessibility on college campuses, contributing to lower overall sense of well-being. Further, student mothers often report feeling stigmatized by instructors and are met with resistance by individuals in authoritative positions they attempt to navigate the dual responsibilities of student- and motherhood. Given these findings and the notable lack of advertised resources available to BYU student mothers, it is worth investigating the overall sense of well-being experienced by student mothers on BYU's campus and how their overall well-being may be enhanced by greater access to on-campus resources.

Methods

In order to conduct this research, I plan to work closely with the Student Moms Club on campus, as I have done in the past during my pursuit of these research questions. I plan to create and distribute a survey within this group with details regarding basic demographic information (age, number of children, marital status) and an adaptation of McLaughlin and Randolph's (2012) School Support Scale. I have used this scale to explore this topic in the past and found it to work well. I also intend to use the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale. I hope to make a few more adjustments to the scales to account for more excellent reliability and validity.

In addition to distributing the survey as I have done in the past, I hope to work more closely with Women's Services to discover the resources currently available to BYU students and how those are currently advertised. I also plan to question each student mother on their level of awareness of on-campus resources, satisfaction with on-campus resources, and desire for new on-campus resources at Brigham Young university in the administered Qualtrics survey.

Qualifications of Thesis Committee

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Chelsea Romney

Dr. Romney is an assistant professor of applied social psychology with a health emphasis. Her research interests center around social relationships and health and inclusive classroom policies. She has numerous scientific publications that explore various topics of well-being, with an emphasis on understanding hormonal cues. Due to her expertise in understanding various aspects of emotional and physical well-being, I believe that Dr. Romney is the perfect faculty advisor to assist me in my pursuits of this project. Up until this point of my project, I have been a student in two of Dr. Romney's classes, returning a second time because I was highly impressed by her effective teaching style and intense passion for the topics she covers. During my most recent class with her in the 2024 winter semester, Dr. Romney advised me and

coauthored on my class project, which centered around understanding resource availability and overall sense of belonging in student mothers. Our research was presented at the biannual Mary Lou Fulton Conference on April 11, 2024.

Faculty Reader: Dr. Sarah Coyne

Dr. Coyne is an associate director within the school of family life. Her research interests include media, aggression, gender, body image, children, adolescence, and family. She is highly published in her field and has had the opportunity to present her research at the White House. Her research centers primarily around media and its effect on children and the family. She has extensive experience working with mothers and children and has expressed interest in my emphasized area of research. I had the pleasure of working alongside Dr. Coyne during the summer of 2024 as an intern for Project M.E.D.I.A., a longitudinal study focusing on the impacts of media on child development and family relationships. Due to her expertise in areas of research parallel to my own, I am choosing her to act as my faculty reader for this project.

Honors Coordinator: Ed Gant

Project Timeline

During my proposal approval process, I will be working closely with Dr. Romney to create a survey appropriate for measuring my intended areas of study. Upon proposal approval, I will administer the survey and begin conducting interviews with the hope of completing data collection by the end of December 2024. Over winter break, I will complete data analysis with the intent of beginning the full construction of my thesis at the beginning of winter semester in January of 2025. My thesis information form will be submitted by February 14, 2025 and my thesis defended by the end of February or beginning of March 2024.

Funding

I do not believe extensive funding will be needed to complete my project. I will be utilizing free survey creation platforms to create and distribute my survey and do not find it necessary to request funding for these purposes. In addition, I plan to use on-campus spaces to communicate with student mothers.

IRB Approval

I obtained IRB approval for this study on November 21, 2024. My IRB number is IRB2024-396. This study was approved as exempt, category 2 and does not require an annual continuing review. Continued approval is conditional upon my compliance with the following requirements:

1. A copy of the approved informed consent statement can be found in iRIS. No other consent statement should be used. Each research subject must be provided with a copy or a way to access the consent statement.
2. Any modifications to the approved protocol must be submitted, reviewed, and approved by the IRB before modifications are incorporated into the study.
3. All recruiting tools must be submitted and approved by the IRB before use.
4. Instructions to access approved documents, submit modifications, and report adverse events can be found on the IRB website, iRIS guide: <https://irb.byu.edu/iris-training-resources>.
5. All non-serious unanticipated problems should be reported to the IRB within two weeks of the PI's first awareness of the problem. Prompt reporting is important, as unanticipated problems often require some modification of study procedures, protocols, and/or informed consent processes. Such modifications require the review and approval of the IRB. Please refer to the [IRB website](#) for more information.

Culminating Experience

My ultimate goal for this research is to bring awareness of student motherhood to BYU and present opportunity and reason for change with regard to the current accessibility and availability of student-mom-specific on-campus resources. I would like this to be a campus initiative, targeted toward BYU. Thus, I do not have intentions to publish my research in any scientific journals. However, I do intend to present my research at the April 2024 Mary Lou Fulton Conference.

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