

# **ADDRESSING THE NEEDS AND CHALLENGES OF HIGH QUALITY CHILD CARE SERVICES ON UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES: ONE INSTITUTION'S COLLABORATIVE APPROACH**

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## **Abstract**

A focus on high-quality child care at institutions of higher education has been in review in recent years. The information in this article provides one campus's approach to the knowledge and beliefs of faculty, staff, and students in regards to high quality child care on a university campus. Research gathered from campus constituents is shared along with procedures for developing a collaborative team. The authors provide recommendations for bringing high quality child care services to institutions of higher learning.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2013, an estimated 8.2 million children in the United States received some form of child care while a parent worked (Purdy, 2013). Finding a trusting and caring learning environment for a very young child is one of the hardest things that a parent has to do (Cohen, 2013c). Research has shown that child care support within an organization can be a value-added benefit for employees and an effective tool for employee retention (Fuller, 2013). This fact is no exception to higher education institutions. Having a family friendly employment atmosphere enables working parents to better meet the responsibilities of their jobs (Christensen, Schneider, & Butler, 2011). College and university campuses have working parents that hold various roles. Working parents at these facilities may include faculty members, with the responsibilities of scholarship, service, and teaching; staff with the demanding roles of managing the facilities; and students who juggle learning tasks while possibly working at least one job. In addition, it is not uncommon for alumni and community members to seek out university campuses for child care. The diverse population demands the need to understand the knowledge and beliefs of constituents in higher education in regards to high quality child care and meeting the needs and challenges of providing this service for a campus community.

Increasingly, colleges and universities are considering or are providing child care services for their campus communities. Additionally, colleagues in the academy are now using teamwork approaches when developing a child care facility for an institution of higher learning. Forsyth (2010) defined teamwork as “the process by which members of a work group combine their knowledge, skills, abilities, and other resources, through a coordinated series of actions to produce an outcome” (p. 367). Team membership can vary in degrees of diversity. Team diversity leads to increases in perspectives, cognitive resources, problem-solving approaches that improve decision-making, a broader range of expertise, insight and ideas, with informal communication and social integration occurring concurrently (Grace, 2012; Forsyth, 2010). This raises the issue of how best practices in the academy are adapted by work groups when creating synergy with team members comprised of a variety of demographic diversity and assigned personnel duties.

### Team Formation

In order to form a team that would provide a holistic and diverse approach to providing campus child care services, the following questions should be asked:

1. Who are the major stakeholders in this project? Are they represented on the team?
2. Are experts in child care/campus child care and child development represented on the team?
3. Are diverse parents represented on the team (faculty, staff student, alumni, community?)
4. Are there non-parents and other representatives on the team who can provide a different viewpoint to the team?
5. Are there representatives from the various stages and processes of developing child care on the team (architects, business and funding raising, administration, legal?)

In order to prevent too large of a work group, team members can serve in different roles in the group (i.e. the child development expert or architect can also be a parent of a young child or an alumni of the university).

## METHODOLOGY

An investigation was conducted at a public comprehensive four-year institution of higher learning located in the southeast region of the United States. A collaborative team approach was developed and charged by the University's President as a standing committee to assess the need for child care services along with developing a plan for implementing this amenity for the campus community. This work group was charged with: (1) preliminary data collection, via quantitative and qualitative designs, from campus constituents who included faculty, staff, students, and alumni; (2) determining the appropriate resources needed around child care facilities and operations; and (3) locating benchmarks and ideas from other institutions with child care initiatives already in place.

Team membership consisted of faculty from the School of Education's Early Child Development unit, administrators from Design and Facilities, Legal Affairs, Risk Management, Procurement, and University Foundation/Development, as well as a non-traditional student with a vested interest and thesis project centered on incorporating child care on college and university campuses. A participatory process and democratic partnership that involves stakeholders — individuals who are affected by the problem being studied — was used to engage in systematic inquiry and investigation of the problem (Stringer, 2007; Herr & Anderson, 2005). The use of a collaborative approach implies that the need to develop cooperation around the task forms harmonious relations between and among people, will emphasize collegial relationships, and aligns individuals charged with collectively finding practical solutions to real world problems (Stringer, 2007; Merriam, 2009).

An internal unit whose focus is on public service and research was contracted to assist the working group in data collection and analysis by providing technical assistance and applied research services. This unit, in collaboration with the team members, helped to refine the survey instrument, programmed and uploaded the tool into a web application, distributed the survey link to identified constituent groups with an introduction and purpose of the initiative, and sent follow-up emails requesting participation in the assessment process. At the close of data collection, the unit provided a baseline report containing analysis and reporting results for all respondents to the survey as well as breakdowns by constituent groups (e.g. faculty, staff, administrators, and alumni). A comprehensive assessment, both with the use of a Likert scale rating and open-ended questions, was distributed to all campus constituents inquiring around the need for child care at the institution. Specifically, 190 faculty, 180 staff members, and 760 students responded to the assessment. Overarching questions asked in the assessment were:

- 1) Do respondents have children under the age of 13 who currently require child care?
- 2) Are all of your child care needs currently being met?
- 3) Has the respondent considered changing their current child care arrangement?
- 4) What are your most important factors when making decisions about child care?
- 5) Has the respondent experienced problems at school or work because of child care issues?

- 6) If the institution provided this service, what is the likelihood of the respondent using the facility?

Other questions were asked that focused on issues of work/life balance, and asked if child care was provided. Examples of these questions are as follows:

- 7) Would the respondent be happier at work if child care was available on campus or within the campus area?
- 8) Would the respondent be less likely to switch schools/change jobs?
- 9) Would the respondent be more productive?
- 10) Would the respondent spend more time on campus?
- 11) Would the benefits of having child care help with the university's recruitment efforts?

## FINDINGS

Data gathered from the campus community indicated a large number who were in agreement to having this service brought to the university. Statistical response rates for faculty and staff approached 50%; and the response rate for students was 22.7%. The results produced preliminary reports of 116 pages of statistical data and over 95 pages of additional comments around this potential initiative.

The data indicated that 176 out of 190 faculty, 170 out of 182 staff, and 736 out of 760 students were in agreement for moving forward with a child care facility at the University. Some constituents' reasons for support were:

- A large percentage of constituents indicated they would utilize childcare on the university campus.
- They feel it is a benefit to employees, students and their families.
- They feel that the facility will be beneficial to faculty, staff and students and provide support for moving toward a lab school for research and student field work.
- Employees without children view the child care facility as a benefit for university community and colleagues.
- The facility would decrease impediments for non-traditional students with children to pursuing or finishing their undergraduate degree work by providing affordable daycare.
- A campus child care center would make the institution more competitive with other universities who already offer child care centers by attracting and retaining students & faculty.

Some positive comments that were expressed regarding bringing high-quality child care to the university included:

*"I think in this day and age, any cutting edge and progressive university needs to have childcare facilities as part of its benefit package both to attract and retain employees."*  
*-respondent A*

*"I used to work for a company that offered onsite day care and it was a comfort to me to know that my child was close by in the event of illness or accident, not to mention, I loved the convenience of dropping him off and picking him up right where I worked."*  
-respondent B

*"I feel a center like this not only benefits students in other majors with kids, but also those in education or early childhood education who can work in the center. This will help to put [the university] in the mix with schools as prestigious [other surrounding universities] who have a center like this.*

-respondent C"

The data also indicated those who were against the proposal of bringing child care services to campus. The findings signified that 14 out of 190 Faculty, 12 out of 182 Staff, and 23 out of 760 Students commented against support for a child care facility on campus. Some reasons participants stated for not supporting this initiative were:

- They do not want increase in tuition and fees to pay for child care facility.
- They feel that the money would be better spent on a football stadium, improvements to library, the student center, Greek houses, etc.
- They expressed concern about University expenses and operating costs
- There is a belief that the university should not be responsible for child care.

Some issues regarding a child care facility at the university that were expressed in the survey's open-ended questions by this population. Reoccurring themes include:

*"Who will operate and manage such a facility?"*

*"I don't feel that this is a good idea because the money to pay the people who will run the childcare center, to....build the center would have to come from somewhere. I fear that they would try to find the money by charging the students a child care fee, regardless if we would even utilize it. I don't believe that to be fair....The fees, we as students are charged, are already almost as much as tuition. College is expensive enough....I think they should spend that money hiring teachers rather than child care."*

-respondent D

*"Will the facility use a lab school model versus the focus on child care services?"*

*"As a Birth through Kindergarten education major, the possibility of having a childcare facility on campus could open up future employment opportunities for me. Not only would it be good for staff, and students who attend school. People majoring in birth through kindergarten could benefit from having a school on campus, allowing them to complete observation and field experience hours on campus from time to time."*

-respondent E

*“Who will incur the costs (student fees and employee benefits)?”*

*“I would not support a childcare facility, which I have no need for, if the funds to build and maintain it were taken from employee funds.”*

*-respondent F*

*I don't feel that this is a good idea because the money to pay the people who will run the childcare center, to....build the center would have to come from somewhere. I fear that they would try to find the money by charging the students a child care fee, regardless if we would even utilize it. I don't believe that to be fair....The fees, we as students are charged, are already almost as much as tuition. College is expensive enough....I think they should spend that money hiring teachers rather than child care.”*

*-respondent G*

After synthesizing the data, a final 33 page document was produced and shared with the President and other senior decision makers. Open town hall meetings were also devised to communicate the findings to the campus community as well as share next steps.

## DISCUSSION

Information from this investigation stressed the need for bringing high-quality child care to a university campus. The majority of respondents stated the campus-based child care would benefit all employees as well as assist in attracting faculty, staff and students to the institution.

Data also indicated that respondents did express concerns regarding fees, expenses and institutional responsibility for running and managing a child care facility. Respondents seem to have questions and expressed assumptions based on lack of knowledge regarding campus based child care, child care administration and quality of child care programs.

The collaborative efforts of the work group demonstrated a seamless process in their approach to addressing the needs and challenges when bringing high quality child care to this campus community. The team recognized their appreciation and value of the diversity amongst them and how these differences influenced the creation of a cohesive team environment. For example, each team member represented specific campus constituent groups that had a vested interest in child care amenities as well as each having the access to the required campus resources to make this vital service available. Not recognizing the differences within the leadership team may have reflected on the work produced by the group. However, this recognition only demonstrates an evolution around the importance of team diversity as oppose to the revolutionary nature of the change process when incorporating diversity of thought and social demographics of a work group that is charged with a collective task (Lyons, 2013). Tuckman's (1965) theoretical work around a group's setting, behavior, and stage of development was evident in the team's collective approach to their responsibility of investigating the university's desire and efforts around having child care service on campus.

## LIMITATIONS

This study investigated one university's needs for child care. These needs were based on an institution that does not have current child care on its campus. It is suggested that additional research studies are conducted with other institutions to determine needs and challenges regarding child care benefits. The study focused on the use an outside provider rather than building a research-based campus laboratory school. There has been limited discussion on the impact of this process on other academic colleges such as the college of education or human services for a research-based laboratory child care that will assist in the instruction of their students.

At the time of the study, variables such as budget, cost, and physical location of the child care site were not identified. These variables seem to be important to participants of the study as well as to stakeholders.

The environment of mutual respect and transparent communication built on the group dynamics which encouraged members to learn from each other is not often used as a best practice in the academy when approaching child care needs. The work group did not immediately recognize their work as a collective approach, but as another standard committee tasked with a specific charge for the university.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The need for high-quality child care in academia has been addressed as a current issue for higher education (Garcia, 2011; Miller, 2011). The factors that determine how this process can occur effectively need to be discussed and reviewed. Based on the findings of this study, stakeholders in higher education may need additional information regarding what high quality child care is and what it can look like within the higher education arena. In addition, educational opportunities regarding bringing child care to the university need to occur campus-wide to assist faculty, staff, students and alumni so that individuals are aware of how this potential benefit will affect student and institutional fees as well as possible tuition increases and costs to the consumer.

A helpful approach to bringing child care to a university campus is to have a diverse committee of individuals who represent various stakeholders in the campus community. In addition to staff, faculty, student and alumni representation, spokespersons from the university administration, various colleges in the institution, faculty experts in child care, legal and financial institutions as well as facilities and building management and risk management. The representation of these individuals assist in bringing different perspectives to the table that may affect how child care will impact the institution of higher education.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

While a significant amount of research is available on the benefits of high quality child care and the impact of low quality child care, more knowledge on outcomes related to student performance on college campus and its correlation to the presence of high quality child care would be useful. Additionally, gaining insight on what factors of the higher education environment impact the quality of child care could be gained through future research.

Another area of future study could be the level and types of collaboration among campus constituents needed to maintain high quality child care at institutions of higher education. The present study explored collaboration among stakeholders in the project of bringing child care to campus. However, more information is needed on the campus partnerships needed to sustain these services on campus and keep it at a level of high quality.

The final area of future research is on child care services versus a lab school on campuses. Gaining a deeper understanding of what the difference is between the two entities and if there are benefits of one type of organization over another at institutions of higher education would be useful in providing the optimal services to meet the needs of the constituents.

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