

Examining Perceived Barriers to Access and Success in Higher Education

Issue Brief 7: Juggling School Responsibilities with Work/Family Responsibilities

Background

The T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® (T.E.A.C.H.) initiative, operating in more than 20 states, provides [comprehensive scholarship support](#) to help the incumbent early childhood workforce take courses leading to two- and four-year degrees in early childhood education. Scholarship recipients are early childhood educators working with children from birth through 5 years of age, often making poverty-level wages, who represent the diversity of young children in our nation, may be the first in their family to go to college and work full time while going to college part time. Each T.E.A.C.H. recipient is supported by a T.E.A.C.H. counselor who helps them navigate college, work and family commitments and helps them meet the expectations of the T.E.A.C.H. scholarship.

In fall 2018, the [T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® National Center](#) (National Center) began a three-part study to examine what T.E.A.C.H. counselors, T.E.A.C.H. associate and bachelor's degree scholarship recipients and their faculty in community colleges and universities believe are the biggest barriers to access and success. Respondents include 61 counselors, 2,071 scholarship recipients and 170 faculty members. Surveys were offered in Spanish and English to scholarship recipients. Participants were asked to rate the degree to which 49 different items were perceived as difficult. These items covered six basic categories: College Application and Admission Processes; T.E.A.C.H. Scholarship Application Processes; Meeting College Expectations for Coursework and Degree Completion; Services for Dual Language Learners; Special College Requirements or Accessibility Issues; and Work/Life/School Balance. Questions about college affordability were not included on this survey, because recipients are all receiving scholarship support that allows for graduation from college with no debt.

Issue: Juggling School Responsibilities with Work/Family Responsibilities

Many non-traditional students, including many T.E.A.C.H. scholarship recipients, experience higher levels of work-family or work-school conflict. Individuals have multiple demands such as work, children and other family responsibilities that [constrain their time and raise stress levels, especially for women](#). Many of these students also find that higher education requires greater income, but with families to care for, work obligations and other demands, [students may be disadvantaged and unable to pay for courses in a timely manner](#). Furthermore, research has also shown that students with more work responsibilities may be [unable to fully attend and participate in class](#), which negatively affects their success in college.

Findings

Across all three survey populations, juggling school with work responsibilities and juggling school with family responsibilities are in the top 10 barriers facing T.E.A.C.H. recipients.

- A high percentage of T.E.A.C.H. counselors (63%) and college faculty (approximately 71%) rated juggling school with work as difficult or very difficult. A significant percentage of T.E.A.C.H. scholarship recipients (40%) rated juggling school with work similarly.
- With regard to juggling school and family responsibilities, a high percentage of T.E.A.C.H. counselors (70%) and college faculty (74%) rated juggling school with family as difficult or very difficult. A high percentage of T.E.A.C.H. scholarship recipients (43%) also rated juggling school with family as difficult or very difficult.

"I had no life other than work and school!"

Colorado T.E.A.C.H. Recipient

Promising Practices

Higher education faculty identified practices being used to address the barriers faced by T.E.A.C.H. recipients. This issue brief identifies three potential strategies.

“This was by far the hardest thing! I wanted to quit so many times! To be completely honest, if I had to do it again, I wouldn’t have. I feel like I lost precious time when my kids were little and Mommy was always doing homework and missing important things with them.”

Rhode Island T.E.A.C.H. Recipient

Strategy #1: Offer online tests, quizzes and assignments with more flexible deadlines, helping students complete work at their convenience. By offering online tests, quizzes and assignments, professors and colleges help alleviate the consequences that come from being forced to find time to complete assignments on campus or at other further away locations. Both Dr. Martha Evans, an Assistant Professor and Campus Liaison at Ohio University (evansm5@ohio.edu), and Dr. Sharron Cuthbertson, Assistant Professor and Coordinator at Florida Gateway College (sharron.cuthbertson@fgc.edu), grant students flexibility in assignments and tests so they can complete work at their own convenience without restricting time spent with their family or at work. In addition, this flexibility reduces text anxiety; anxiety can increase work-family-school conflict which can spill over into the quality of interactions a student has with their family, coworkers/supervisors and children in their classrooms. Patsy Yager, an Early Childhood Education Instructor at Western Nebraska Community College (yagerp@wncc.edu), opens up assignments early so students can plan their time accordingly, especially if they have other demands.

Strategy #2: Encourage constant communication between students and teachers. Often, issues arise with juggling work-family-school responsibilities, because teachers do not know students may have outside responsibilities and may be struggling with those competing demands. Many non-traditional students would like [professors to better understand the stressors and obstacles uniquely faced by these students](#). Encouraging constant communication up front and throughout programs is vital for student success because it alleviates potential burdens and increases the connection between individuals, faculty and other students.

Strategy #3: Hold regular, extended and non-traditional office hours for students with responsibilities that prevent them from getting help at traditional times or locations. [Interaction with faculty members helps bolster student success](#), but if non-traditional students have other pressing family-work demands, they may be unable to participate in that faculty-student interaction. As a result, holding office hours during non-normal times or in more accessible locations may increase the number and quality of those faculty-student interactions. Patsy Yager (contact information listed in first strategy) holds regular office hours and by-appointment office hours to meet the needs of *all* her students, especially those that cannot attend regular office hours. Holding virtual office hours is also an option.

The National Center is creating an expanding [list](#) of resources that address specific barriers in higher education.



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