

A Different Kind of Pregnant Student

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When people talk about students and unwanted pregnancies, many think about teenagers dropping out of high school. But this category also includes community college students in their 20s -- and a new campaign is trying to prevent those pregnancies and keep the students enrolled.

Last week, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, a nonpartisan group, brought the issue to Capitol Hill, touting statistics about unplanned pregnancies at community colleges before educators and legislators in hopes of inspiring those at two-year institutions to help prevent these pregnancies among their students. The group's latest informational brief and report note that 61 percent of students who have a child after enrolling in a community college drop out before finishing a degree or credential; this dropout rate is 64 percent higher than that of their counterparts who did not have children. On the whole, 48 percent of all community college students "have ever been pregnant or gotten someone pregnant."

Though unintended or unplanned pregnancies are traditionally seen as an issue of concern for teenagers in high school, officials from the National Campaign argue that concentrating on the country's community colleges is likely the best way to slow this trend as more and more women at risk of having an unplanned pregnancy are now attending these institutions.

"It might surprise some people, but most unplanned pregnancies are not to teens but to unmarried women in their 20s," said Andrea Kane, senior director of policy and partnerships at the National Campaign. "Seven in 10 pregnancies among single women in their 20s are unplanned. When you start to think, 'How can we make a difference, and where are these young people?' The answer is that a growing number of them are now community college students."

Addressing community college administrators about unplanned pregnancies among their students seems at bit odd at first, Kane explained, until they began to understand how working to prevent these unplanned pregnancies can boost their overall student retention and success rates.

"When we first started to raise this issue at community colleges, there is this very common reaction that we still get," Kane said. "They'll say, 'We haven't really thought about this concern before.' Then, the next thing they'll say is, 'But that actually makes a lot of sense.' Officials at these institutions know that students have to drop out because of things like unplanned pregnancies, but they often don't stop to think about prevention in the first place. That's the 'Ah-ha' moment we're seeing out there. We used to talk a lot about teen pregnancy in the past, but now unplanned pregnancy during adulthood is getting a lot more attention."

Talking about sex at a community college is different from talking about it at a high school, Kane added, noting that the moral and political debates that often divide parents are often moot now that the students they are addressing are now legal adults.

"In my experience, there aren't the flashpoints that you see in high school," Kane said. "These students, as adults, don't want to talk just about sex; they want to talk about relationships. ... Also, we're not coming in with an ideological stance. Our group doesn't take a stance on abortion, and if students are going to have sex we support their use of contraception."

Still, the National Campaign, Kane said, is not pushing for something akin to sex ed for community college. Instead, she argued, it is trying to show community colleges how unplanned pregnancies can disrupt many students' goals of graduation. To show what colleges can do to help their students in this manner, it recently provided about \$100,000 in grants to three community colleges around the country to fund differing educational efforts.

Rochellda Adderley, project director of the specific National Campaign project at Delaware Technical and Community College, said the institution used its grant money to establish a health clinic on its Wilmington campus -- a luxury the institution was previously unable to afford. This physical space on campus, she said, provides, students, who might not

otherwise have access to affordable health care, a safe place to discuss issues of reproductive health or receive referrals to groups, like Planned Parenthood, for example, for further help.

“In high school, you’re kind of told, ‘Here’s how your body works,’ ” Adderley said. “Now, here, that you know how your body works, we can talk to those students about the precautions they should be taking sexually and get them the information about what’s threatening to them. At the center, we distribute birth control; we distribute the morning after pill. We make sure all the options that are legally available to them are available. A lot of the demographics that are attending our community college wouldn’t otherwise have been able to get these things.”

Response to the recently opened clinic and other related reproductive health workshops has exceeded Delaware Technical’s expectations. Adderley said it was the college’s goal to reach 500 students through the clinic and other on-campus activities this year and that it has already served more than 1,500.

Jim Walters, director of student life at Montgomery College’s Takoma Park/Silver Spring campus, in Maryland, is heading up a different approach at his institution. To his surprise, however, students, not administrators, have made the issue of unplanned pregnancy a matter of importance.

“When we did a listening tour with the National Campaign, the student government cohorts told us that we needed to talk to them more and give them more information about pregnancy and sexual health because it was very serious to them,” Walters said. “In truth, it’s something we’ve seen on all of our campuses, and it’s just not going to be addressed by ignoring it.”

Like most community colleges, the Montgomery campus at which Walters works does not have a student health center. Still, he said the college has found other ways to inform students about reproductive issues.

“We’ve been working with faculty members to talk about student services in class,” Walters said. “Also, we’re trying to get some faculty members to bring these issues and integrate them into their work. For health classes it’s kind of easier. So, for instance, in those classes they’ll watch TV shows like ‘The Baby Borrowers’ [on NBC] and ‘16 and Pregnant’ [on MTV], and then they’ll talk about those issues and think more deeply about them.”

Walters, like many other community college officials experimenting with these programs, could not provide information about the numbers of unplanned pregnancies on his campus. Still, he suspects that their numbers are going up. Indicative of this perceived rise, Walters said the college is considering offering more childcare services to students who have to bring their children to campus to attend classes. Still, those discussions, he said, are only in the beginning stages.

This issue also has the attention of the American Association of Community Colleges, which sent lawmakers a letter of support for specific provisions in the “Preventing Unintended Pregnancies, Reducing the Need for Abortion and Support Parents Act,” which “authorizes demonstration grants [of \$15 million for fiscal years 2010-12] to community colleges to support activities to prevent unplanned pregnancies.” The House bill, introduced by Rep. Timothy Ryan, a Democrat from Ohio, is before the House Education and Labor Committee.

“Without question, unplanned pregnancies have a tremendous negative impact on the ability of community college student to finish their studies,” wrote George R. Boggs, AACC president, in the letter to Ryan. “In America’s higher education system, students who have unplanned pregnancies are concentrated in community colleges.”

— David Moltz