College students who are also parents shared their experiences in a panel discussion at the Governor’s Forum reflecting upon their joys, fears, hopes, and discovery as college student-parents. Research suggests college student parents often describe feeling like an outsider with unmet needs on campus because their needs are significantly different than other similar aged students who are not parents. While research is immensely varied on the demographics, socioeconomic indicators and motivational levels leading to degree attainment for these students, there is a consistent theme that children generate an intense commitment to academics as student-parents embrace increased responsibility for themselves, their children, and their children’s academic future. “In my experience there is no better motivation to finish college and to appreciate the marrow of the experience than a child whose future depends on your decisions” (Rizer, 2005, B5).

Kimberley, a single mother of a 13 year old son, and Sanders, a recently divorced mother of a 7 year old and one month old; each describe time to be a most valuable asset, and services to help maximize time assist in their success.

*Use of the REACH system was collaboration between rural hospitals and MSU-COT. I did not have to drive 60 miles to attend class, giving me more time for family, studying, and working part time. I believe if more opportunities similar to this were provided for those living in rural areas, student would have a better chance of succeeding with their goals. Sanders*

*My schedule is very arduous – it is a huge, huge commitment. One and a half hour lectures twice a week instead of three 50 minute lectures could result in a reduced commute time, fuel costs and auto maintenance and less time off from work – this could help with my balance to success. Kimberley*

Balancing their children’s care and determining when their homework takes precedent over parent and child time is the greatest angst described, yet the children are the most significant reason described to be in school is for their children.

*The greatest motivation for me is to provide a better future for my family. The greatest fear for me is that my going to school will cost my son his future. I am proud to be a role model for my son. I am excited to be learning new things. There is a huge sense of accomplishment and pride. Kimberley*
When I started college my greatest motivation was setting example for my son. After my husband and I separated, I also became motivated by the fact that I needed to provide for myself and my son. My greatest fear was failure. Sanders

Daycare and supportive educational services for children could be particularly beneficial as parents pursue their academics and don’t feel they are neglecting their children’s needs, but rather a support for the entire family with their academic pursuits.

While not having a daycare on campus did not affect me, many of my classmates in Great Falls expressed the need for it. To have reduced rates for daycare would be helpful, but it would also save time for them because they would only have to drive to campus. Sanders

K-12 schools or the college could provide targeted assistance for students who need help with their homework which are taught by a teacher of each discipline. This would help with time to balance my studies and my son’s. Kimberley

Some parents maintain a part-time schedule as a necessity to maintain all of their responsibilities, and this could potentially place the part-time student with unfair advantage.

I’m not eligible to apply for academic awards and possibly not as competitive for scholarships because of my part-time status. I may work harder to maintain my GPA than a full time traditional student with no responsibilities, but as it stands, the current system is keeping me at a disadvantage. Although my GPA places me on the Dean’s Honor List, I’m not included because I’m part-time. Kimberley

Access and admittance to a college for students who are parents reflects planning and thought about a major prior to entering school.

After moving back to MT, I decided to try something different, and applied to become a nursing assistant. I found that I really liked my new job, and decided that I would like to pursue a nursing degree. Sanders

I went to the local job service and participated in a career assessment testing program. Kimberley

Support systems are recognized as critical to academic success, and families are most frequently recognized.

My greatest support is my parents. They not only encouraged me, but helped with my son. My ex-husband was flexible with our custody agreement, switching days with me if needed. I also had a fellow classmate who is a single mother, and we often helped each other. Sanders

College is going to cost something (besides money!). These things need to be sorted through and even talked through with family members. Kimberley