

# **Graduate student parents' views on the new Student Child Care Assistance Program**

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Part I summarizes my conversations with student parents about the new Student Child Care Assistance Program and about their situation at Princeton in general. The discussions resulted in more than 60 e-mails posted to the [childcare@princeton](mailto:childcare@princeton) list and/or to me personally over the past few weeks. I also met with five parents in person, all of whom relayed more opinions and stories from friends who were reluctant speak up online. Part II builds on these findings to propose certain changes that would make the SCCAP more equitable while using essentially the same amount of resources.

## **Part I: Findings from discussions with graduate student parents**

### **1.1 Spouse employment requirement**

Graduate student parents realize that with the new SCCAP program, the university will increase by an order of magnitude or more its grants to help students afford child care. Overall, parents very much appreciate the spirit and scope of this initiative. However, a large number of them have also expressed concerns regarding the equitability of the distribution of funds. They have suggested that there would be better ways of achieving the university's stated goals given the amount of money available.

In one form or another, almost all of the concerns revolve around the spousal employment requirement. A student becomes eligible for SCCAP support only if his/her spouse is employed at least 50% of the time. The immediate, numerous, and passionate reactions made it obvious that this requirement is touching a raw nerve. The general assumption that households with one stay-at-home parent do not need child care is perceived as being misguided. They have also pointed out many ways in which graduate students differ from the university's staff and that therefore a child care program tailored to the staff would not be expected to fit graduate students equally well.

In contrast to staff, graduate students are a population in transition; almost all of them have recently moved (to Princeton). Temporary unemployment of spouses upon arrival at Princeton is inevitable in most cases, even for those who are legally allowed to work. It is not untypical for the spouse's job search to take 6-12 months even when the couple has no children. Not every kind of job is readily available in the Princeton area. Spouses are often highly trained/specialized but do not have a lot of on-the-job experience yet, which limits the number of positions. They are not yet keyed into local professional networks that could help with the search. Some common occupations require state certification (teachers, nurses, lawyers) and preparing for them can be time-consuming.

Making the best of this inevitable disruption of the spouse's career, many couples plan to have children immediately before or after arrival at Princeton. Many spouses want to re-enter the job market as soon as possible. When they do so, they face all of the challenges above. But in addition, they are now most likely looking for a part-time job in order to ease the transition for the child. Unfortunately, quality part-time jobs tend to be much more limited, and often these first steps back into the job market pay very little while the price for child care is very high.

Example 1: A spouse of a Princeton graduate student started to volunteer part-time in the lab of a Rutgers professor. Her goal was admission into this lab as a master's student for the following academic year. In the beginning, she worked for two days per week and tried Backup Care to take care of her child. However, there were reliability issues and she was uncomfortable not knowing who the care giver would be on any given day. Affording real child care was impossible. So she scaled back to one day per week, during which her husband stayed home to watch the child.

Example 2: The husband of a graduate student was working on finishing his first book and getting it published. This is an example of a demanding job with no pay or tax returns to show for. They were lucky in that their two children were admitted to U-League. They would not be eligible for awards due the SCCAP's spousal work requirement.

Example 3: A wife of a graduate student works for one day per week as a social worker. She would like to work more but makes less money than child care would cost. As it is, her husband stays home for one day per week. They are not eligible for SCCAP aid because of the employment requirement.

Example 4: A wife of a graduate student had worked for Princeton University for a year before she had her first child. Soon she wanted to return to work for two days a week. However, working only 40% she would have not been eligible for the staff health care plan. Dependent care under her husband's student plan cost \$250/month more than under the staff plan (the staff plan was still covering her for that first year of maternity leave). She would have paid \$3,000 in additional health insurance on a gross salary of about \$16,000. She would have to add child care at an estimated \$4,000. She would not be eligible for SCCAP assistance.

Example 5: A wife of a graduate student was studying for her GRE's and applying to graduate school this year. She was able to trade child care with a friend and her husband stayed home to watch their child while she studied. She has now been accepted to a Ph.D. program at Rutgers. Had they had access to affordable childcare then the husband would have been able to work and the process would have stressed them out far less. Without the option of childcare trading it would have been even more difficult. They would not have been eligible for SCCAP aid.

Example 6: An Asian graduate student's goal was to become a professor in geophysics. She determined that graduate school would be the least bad time to have a baby. Her

Ph.D. advisor supported her in that decision. However, her husband could not imagine himself as a primary care giver, largely due to cultural expectations on him. (He was not allowed to work in the U.S. either.) With a family support network or even just part-time child care, she would have gone ahead and had the child. But child care it was out of question in terms of cost. Instead she had the baby during her first months as a post-doc. Predictably, she is now struggling to live up to the expectations of the new lab and to be as productive as needed. One might be tempted to express disappointment about the husband's role but in the end it may just make sense to support women like her regardless of it.

Example 7: A husband of a graduate student came here with a work visa but no job. His field made it difficult for him to find work near Princeton. For several months, his searching for work amounted to a full-time job. They absolutely needed child care during this process.

Example 8: A spouse of a Princeton foreign graduate student had worked for a top-tier international NGO before coming to Princeton. After staying at home for a year, she volunteered for a professor at the Woodrow Wilson School. He was so happy with her that he hired her and sponsored her work visa for the couple's remaining three years at Princeton. With the extra income the couple could afford the child care it had not had during the volunteer period.

The examples illustrate needy populations not covered under the proposed SCCAP. Certain career steps clearly pay off in the long run but families suffer in the short term because the spouse makes very little and the family still needs child care. In a more settled population, support from family and friends can go a long way but graduate students usually have little support of this kind. In households where three people survive on \$20,000, even temporary child care needs (during a job search or preparation period) are a cause of great anxiety. This is as stressful to the graduate student parent as it is to the spouse. Students have to stay home part of the time in order to accommodate their partners. Perhaps worse, the combination of no child care during the job search, the student's long working hours, constant financial worries, and the job market situation around Princeton can act to paralyze spouses. They get so tired and discouraged that they don't make any career moves. This can put intense strains on the relationships and hence on students' productivity.

It became apparent that few situations are completely traditional or clear-cut in terms of gender role distributions. For most couples, a lot of creative compromising necessary to make graduate school at Princeton happen. Everybody is anxious to not completely drop the ball on their careers. Staying at home for a year is not so much the problem as that "There is no in between" (staying at home and full-time employment), as one spouse put it. Spouses face obstacles and disincentives to a gradual way back to work even though the opposite would be desirable. Graduate student parents are disappointed that the university could have used the SCCAP to address this problem but did not.

The good news is that a moderate amount of child care support regardless of the spouse's status (less than \$5,000/year, see recommendations below) would meet the needs of most couples. During the recruiting process, Princeton would have a great competitive advantage if it could demonstrate meaningful and flexible support for a wide variety of family arrangements.

### 1.2 Access to pre-school

Regardless of their career aspirations, many couples with a stay-at-home spouse are worried about not being able to afford the educational part of pre-school for 3-5 year olds, due to the spouse employment requirement. They feel that the competitiveness of the education system effectively makes pre-school a necessity for an optimal start in school. Hence we encountered strong expressions of worry and anger that the SCCAP discriminates against households with stay-at-home spouses by withholding this perceived necessity while providing it for free to their peers on SCCAP support (the educational part of pre-school costs less than \$5,000/year). These feelings are aggravated by the fact that single-earner households typically survive on considerably less money in the first place and thus have no buffer to absorb the cost of pre-school.

### 1.3 Students who need full-time child care

For the large majority students, a few thousand dollars of child care support per year will go a long way towards satisfying most or all needs. However, some students will still depend on support well beyond \$5,000 in order to succeed in their academic programs in a timely manner. Examples include single mothers and couples where both partners work full-time in low-paying jobs (e.g. two graduate students).

## Part II: Recommendations for changes to the SCCAP

**1. Lower the amount of the routine child care award** from \$5,000 to, say, \$3,000 **but drop the spouse-employment requirement** for the reasons discussed. (The absolute number could be different from \$3,000 but should not be much lower). The only eligibility requirement would be household income below a certain threshold. Students widely agree that this would be a more equitable solution. It would take pressure off of all households by providing some latitude to negotiate the typically complicated dual career aspirations. The plan would be simple to administer because \$3,000 would meet the needs of the majority of grad student parents and keep special requests at a manageable level. The university would save time and effort by not having to verify employment status.

**2. A special needs committee** should consider requests for child care support beyond \$3,000. This would cover a smaller but very needy part of the population mentioned earlier. It would be a relatively small but crucial component of the entire program. We

anticipate that by lowering the base amount for everybody from \$5,000 to \$3,000 there will be substantial left-over funds (compared to the currently projected spending). Students could apply for these funds through a straightforward, transparent process. Review by the special needs committee would ensure that money is awarded according to the university's goals and react to changing circumstances in a flexible way. It would also allow administrators to collect detailed data about the graduate student parent population, usage patterns and needs. This information should be very valuable for optimal planning for the university's own child care center. In order to decide how exactly to distribute funds, the university could learn from the long-established practices of U-Now and U-League. Graduate student parents have also expressed interest to form an informal advisory group.

A scheme that students felt would be equitable could work as follows:

Reimbursement of child care expenses up to 3,000/year is basically automatic. Students can request any additional amount up to a reasonable maximum, e.g. the median cost of full-time child care in Princeton. They would fill out a standardized web form (similar to the yearly housing draw) describing their situation and need. The support could be provided subject to a requirement that parents contribute some fixed percentage of their own income. A reasonable percentage might be 11-13% of household income since the guidelines of the staff ECCAP state that an employee should not have to spend more than that on child care.

Examples:

A single mother requests support for full-time child care costing \$14,000/year. Her stipend is \$20,000. She pays \$2,200. The university pays \$11,800.

A couple requests support for full-time child care costing \$14,000/year. If their combined income is \$50,000 they pay \$5,500 and the university pays \$8,500 (assuming that the description of their situation sounds reasonable).

If their combined income is \$90k, they pay \$9,900 and the university pays \$4,100.

If the couple has two children, they still pay only 11% of their income and the university pays the difference. But in this case they may reasonably be expected to find child care that costs less than two times \$14,000.

All examples assume the least favorable end member of full-time child care at Princeton prices. The university may have to contribute large amounts in some cases. But the scheme discourages misuse because students willing to contribute 11% of their small income are making a big sacrifice. The university can rest assured that its help is badly wanted and needed. If the total funds are not sufficient then the rules would have to be modified, either through a higher student contribution, or tougher eligibility criteria for full-time care, or other criteria like the ones U-Now uses.

Note that most students would NOT benefit from this "special needs" component because of the high contribution threshold. Yet it is widely seen as crucial part of a good program because it accomodates students who face the greatest hardships. This is in spirit with the university's current practice of awarding a small number of full scholarships for U-NOW.

**3. Pre-school expenses would require no special treatment under the scheme proposed.** 3,000/year would cover most or all of it. If for some reason the spouse-work requirement cannot be dropped categorically, then the SCCAP should at least provide support for the educational part of pre-school regardless of the spouse's status in the labor market. A few mornings per week at pre-school are widely regarded as a necessity for a good start in the U.S. education system. This seems to be at least as relevant for the children of foreign parents who have had little exposure to American language and culture at home (two thirds of foreign graduate students permanently settle in the U.S.) Spouses of international students are usually not allowed to work and hence not eligible for the SCCAP.