

Young Parent Understands Importance of Completion

Hours after his daughter was born, Juan Betancur left the hospital to attend a college orientation program. The incongruity of being a new father and a new college student fresh out of high school was one of the many challenges he faced as a teenaged parent.

Eventually, the strain of working six days a week and sharing in the care of an infant overwhelmed his first attempt at college.

Despite having to put off college for eight years, Betancur was surprised to learn in Tamra Ortgies-Young's Introduction to Public Administration class last spring at Georgia Perimeter College (GPC) that 61 percent of women who have children while enrolled in community college drop out and do not return to school. Although the dropout rate was higher than he expected, he understands why.

"It's extremely difficult. I don't sleep much," said Betancur, who is taking eight credit hours this fall, working full time and serving as the custodial parent of his now 10-year-old daughter. He plans to complete his associate degree in December and then transfer to Georgia State University.

"I'm just more motivated than ever and more determined to succeed and get my degree and to get myself and my daughter a better life, so I just push through," Betancur added.

A hard look at life choices

Betancur's personal story and his advice "to be smart" about sex is the subject of Nine Months, one of three public service videos that Ortgies-Young's students created in spring 2012. Each student also wrote a research paper on the policy issues of unplanned pregnancy, participated in attitude and behavior surveys, and wrote online journals reflecting on the financial and personal costs of unplanned pregnancies.

GPC is one of five community colleges that have been working since 2009 with the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) and the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy on Make It Personal: College Completion (MIPCC). The three-year demonstration program aims to improve student retention

and success by addressing pregnancy planning, prevention and healthy relationships.

Half of all pregnancies in the U.S.—about 3 million a year—are unplanned, and pregnancy among young adults is at the root of a number of important public health and social challenges, including college dropout rates. Given the number of community college students who are already parents, the project aims both to help those who are not yet parents avoid an unplanned pregnancy and help those who are already parents, such as Betancur, delay having another child until they are finished with their education.

AACC and the National Campaign encourage community colleges to:

Incorporate information about unplanned pregnancy into student support services including orientation, first-year experience and other college success courses.

Integrate information about unplanned pregnancy into academic courses.

Raise awareness and provide resources about the connection between unplanned pregnancy and completion through their websites.

MIPCC college faculty members have developed templates for courses in various disciplines that use pregnancy prevention as a focus of service learning projects. AACC and the National Campaign are offering a webinar that instructs faculty in ways to incorporate pregnancy prevention information into their courses.

While most community colleges have not historically addressed the issue of how an unplanned pregnancy can affect completion, the response from administrators, faculty and students themselves has been overwhelmingly positive, said Andrea Kane, senior director for public policy at the National Campaign.

"Administrators see it as one more way to help their students succeed; faculty note that students are eager for information and engaged when they address the topic; and students appreciate the opportunity to learn about and discuss a topic that is very real in their lives," Kane said. "The

National Campaign has been inspired by the creative way that faculty have integrated the topic of unplanned pregnancy into their courses and looks forward to working with many more colleges in the future.”

Infused in service learning, other courses

Ortgies-Young, the political science instructor at GPC, found that pregnancy prevention was more personally relevant to students than climate change, which she used for a service learning focus in another course.

“As a class, they were very cohesive and it certainly built camaraderie,” she said, adding, “By the end of the semester there was such an awareness (of pregnancy prevention) it seemed that there would be a lot of serious planning going on.”

This fall, her Political Science 101 Honors course will blend pregnancy prevention with social networking service learning projects. Students will use iPads provided by the college and e-textbooks provided by Cengage Publishing. They will use the iPads to complete online lessons published by the National Campaign, Preventing Unplanned Pregnancy and Completing College. Although the lessons were developed for first-year students, they can be helpful in a variety of courses. The three lessons are available for free on the National Campaign’s website.

“One of the most important things I’ve learned about teaching political science is that efforts to build civic engagement into course design (including service learning projects) significantly increase retention. Both kinds: Student learning outcomes and student retention to course completion, as well. Since incorporating these high-impact practices in all of my classes, retention and outcomes have increased,” Ortgies-Young wrote in an email.