

University Support for Pregnant Students Common

When Chaunie Brusie saw the blue positive lines on her pregnancy test, she panicked. At 21 years old, she had just started her senior year at Saginaw Valley State University in University Center, Mich.

“I really didn’t know what to do,” Brusie says. “I went to the health center that was located on our campus. The nurse practitioner who ran the full health campus center knew nothing. I asked her if I could purchase insurance, [which] specifically excluded maternity coverage. I asked if she could help me find a list of doctors that I could go to. She basically knew nothing that could help me stay in school and continue the pregnancy.”

Brusie started crying in her office. “She actually ended up walking out on me,” Brusie says. “That was a low point.”

Brusie, who comes from a Catholic family, had always adopted a staunch pro-life stance. But as soon as she became pregnant, she says, abortion “was my first thought. No one would ever have to know.”

“Of the students I have worked with directly, my sense is that most have chosen to have an abortion,” says John O’Keefe, a dean of student life at Wellesley College. “Fewer chose to continue the pregnancy to term.”

The Guttmacher Institute estimates that about 40% of women who obtain abortions are college-age. Brusie chose to carry to term, giving birth to baby Ada a week after her graduation.

College students like Brusie do have children, and some choose to raise them while attending college.

WiscAid, the Wisconsin Financial Aid Study, indicated that 23% of undergraduates enrolled in college in 2008

had at least one child — yet less than 1 in 10 students with children completed their bachelor’s degree within six years of college entry.

“[Colleges] haven’t set up an environment and procedures to handle their pregnant students,” says Beth O’Malley, the national programs coordinator for Students for Life. “Health centers haven’t prepared very well for it.”

While many colleges provide information on birth control and STDs, O’Malley says, they rarely provide information about pregnancy. A Students for Life survey found that only 15% of students had seen ads on campus providing support for pregnant students.

Colleges rarely provide day care for students and many force pregnant women to live off-campus after their second trimester for liability reasons.

“That creates a whole new problem,” O’Malley says. “You have students who can’t afford off-campus housing. Then they have to figure out transportation. They’re isolated.”

Rachel Fraser discovered her pregnancy the second semester of her freshman year at the University of California-Riverside. A first-generation college student and sorority sister, Fraser dreamed of obtaining her doctorate in psychology.

“I told my boyfriend. We were both in immense shock,” Fraser says. “Abortion was never an option. I just know in my heart I would have thought every day what my life could have been like.” An additional shock: Fraser was pregnant with twin boys.

Fearing that the university would disapprove of her pregnancy, Fraser kept it a secret from her professors and many of her peers.

Over the summer, she obtained credits at an online community college. After her boys were born in November, she returned to UCR.

“It was very difficult,” Fraser says. “Most college students are partying. There was no partying. My kids are the most important thing to me.”

Commuting to UCR became too much, Fraser says, so she enrolled in a satellite campus, which allowed her to stay home and care for her boys.

Some schools do offer housing for pregnant undergraduates.

Georgetown University, for example, houses undergraduate mothers in a townhouse. Unlike the majority of other universities, they allow pregnant students to stay in the dorms until they give birth.

According to Carol Day, Georgetown’s director of Health Education Services, the townhouse is “usually occupied.”

Day attributes Georgetown’s strong support for pregnant students to the college’s Jesuit origins.

“Everyone has finished [school],” says Day of pregnant students. “It may take them a little longer, but often it doesn’t. I don’t think they have much of a social life between being a parent and being a student, [but] everyone with a little bit of support can make this work for them.”

Many undergraduates who carry their pregnancies to term do not complete their degrees.

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy estimates that 61% of women who have children after enrolling in community college end up dropping out, which is 65% higher than the rate for women who don’t have children.

Both Fraser and Brusie completed their undergraduate degrees. Neither of them has ever regretted having their children. Yet both felt the shame and stigma of young motherhood.

“We don’t need anything crazy special, we just want to feel normal,” Brusie says. “I was old enough that people felt that I should have known better. Deal with it, or get rid of it.”

Fraser agrees.

“You’re less of an individual because you had kids younger, despite what you may be achieving.”

Fraser is completing her doctorate in psychology at Fielding Graduate University in Santa Barbara, Calif. “People think because you have kids it’s the end of your life. [It’s] very demeaning.”

Brusie, now 27, has three kids, works as a nurse and is publishing a book about her pregnancy. “There’s still so much shame associated with it,” she says. “You can still succeed and live your dreams as a mother.”