

In the last Couleecap Community Concerns paper, Rick Blasing, Guidance Counselor for the La Crosse School District, wrote about the presentation of childhood poverty in schools. To build on that discussion, we asked Andrea Hansen, Self-Sufficiency Program (SSP) Director at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, to share her experience working with low-income, single parents who have a dream of attending college. The SSP is a supportive, pre-college program for single parents who are preparing to be successful college students. To learn more about SSP, as well as Couleecap programs to help people with low-income access higher education, please see the information box.

Claiming an Education

An Act of courage, hope, and tenacity for Low-Income Students

By guest author Andrea Hansen, Program Director, Self-Sufficiency Program, Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse

Education is a pathway out of poverty, but it is not an easy path.

"I struggled a lot as a single parent working almost full time (32 hrs weekly) and going to school full time. I took out all the student loans I could and had grants but to pay for school books make up for the hours I was missing out on from a true full time employee. The extra daycare/ babysitters the extra expenses for school like travel uniforms car repairs etc it was a constant battle. I had my car repossessed once for being 45 short on my overdue (by 32 days) payment. I had my electricity disconnected twice for overdue bills. I worked overtime on school breaks but I could never get ahead I was always playing catch up. On paper I made too much money to qualify for any benefits except childcare until my last semester of school. They cut that off then too. My rent was 460\$ a month and we lived in an unsafe neighborhood in a dilapidated apartment with a slumlord but it's what we could affordeven though some months we really couldn't even afford that. I was trying to better myself, I was not "sitting at home collecting welfare," I was staying up 24 hrs at a time working and going to school in order to get out of that situation and there was literally no help for me."

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(Student Parent Community Facebook post, La Crosse)

That is why programs and resources must be available and accessible to help students along their journey. I became the SSP's half-time program director in 2011, inheriting the strong community and campus relationships that sustain SSP. I joined colleagues in WGSS, the academic home that birthed and has nurtured SSP over three decades. I also had access to over 425 application essays that gave me insights about what college meant to low-income women. I found the recurrent themes of education as a source of empowerment and discovery of purpose. **The women sought a college education to be an example, use one's potential, continue to grow, give back, helping others, show one's child that they, too, can achieve their dreams, and a pathway to connect to something larger than themselves.** Of course, increased access to family-supporting incomes and career opportunities is also mentioned. For these students, however, education represents something more. College is a path to personal liberation and fulfillment of a responsibility to self, one's family, and the wider community.

Claiming an Education

The essay entitled *Claiming an Education* (Rich, 1977) has been required reading for SSP students from the start. In it, Adrienne Rich urges young female college students to think of being at college **to claim an education**, rather than to receive one. She explains that, "To claim means, to take as rightful owner. To assert in the face of possible contradictions." This classic reading challenges all students to take responsibility for their education and their lives, and to expect professors and others to respect one's education and thinking, too.

SSP applicants and student parents know something about asserting themselves "in the face of possible contradictions." Most SSP participants are women and single parents with two children. The average age of students is 32 years. 18 percent are women of color. 70 percent have high school diplomas and 87 percent have attempted college at least once. Almost all participants struggle with low-wage work, instability in hours and schedules, dead-end jobs, and inadequate

and expensive childcare. They may be experiencing housing insecurity and carry debt, from payday lenders or past education loans. A significant number of participants are survivors of sexual and physical abuse. They may be managing mental and/or physical health issues, AODA recovery challenges, or negotiating the significant barriers that come with being an ex-offender.

The act of claiming an education in the face of these barriers, challenges and doubts speaks to the courage, hope, and tenacity of student parents. These experiences engender nagging anxieties about being “good enough” for college. The current context of reduced financial support for education, program requirements that discourage college attendance, public messages about the value of an education and pronouncements about who should and shouldn’t go to college intensify their doubts. Nevertheless, low-income single-parents continue to test their claim to an education through the SSP experience.

Student Parents in College

In the first weeks of SSP, I share information with SSP students about the rapidly changing profile of the average college student to allay the fears of not “fitting in” as nontraditional students. It helps to know that 47% of the U.S. student population is over the age of 25 and student parents are a quarter of all undergraduates (Women’s Policy Research Council, 2017). Learning that single parents make up 43% of the total student-parent population reassures SSP participants that college is possible.

I briefly introduce the “return on investment” rationale for a college education with its impressive calculated 15.2 percent per year return (Greenstone and Looney 2011). This is not familiar territory or a terrible compelling argument for most students. When one is in debt and has the monthly stress of covering food and rent, investment is the language of luxury. Instead, we mostly talk about FAFSA, being smart about student loans, the importance of completing scholarship applications, the advantages of work-study income, and participating in every possible social and economic support program. We emphasize the importance of completing each semester, making friends with financial aid officers, withdrawing officially if one must, and seeking and using support services. Stories from past SSP students who graduated from college inspire a special confidence.

Every SSP student comes with stories about others who have attempted college without finishing, and the loans and difficulties that result. They aren’t surprised to learn the statistics that single parents graduate at less than half the rate of others students and only a quarter of single parents in college complete their degrees within six years of starting (Women’s Policy Research Council (2017). We work to identify the personal strategies and the community and campus supports that can make a difference. We remind them of the Locally Grown Scholarship program of SSP and we say we wish we could do more.

What student parents appreciate most is the confirmation that their children will be okay despite the sacrifices involved in pursuing a degree. The evidence is strong. When low-income single mothers achieve a college degree, their children benefit twice, firstly from their mother's higher earning power, and secondly from witnessing their mother’s success in breaking through the barriers to access the world of college. These benefits persist to shape the college aspirations of these children and increase their likelihood of attending college (Jones-DeWeever and Gault, 2006).

It is difficult to understand why public policy isn’t capitalizing on a two-generational approach to ending poverty and a workforce motivated to learn and contribute. It is difficult to understand why student parents who, despite their ability, effort, tenacity, and sheer courage, must encounter challenges like those described below.

Empowerment and Purpose

Student parents believe that college will change their lives and the lives of their children. They know that college will provide a way out of low-wage work and the constancy of stress. They are motivated by a strong desire to make a difference, in their own lives and the life of their communities. These words reflect the promise and potential of these student parents.

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About the Self-Sufficiency Program

The Self-Sufficiency Program (SSP) is a pre-college program that helps low-income single parents prepare to be successful college students. In this supportive setting, SSP students practice the academic skills of writing, reading, thinking, and math reasoning. They explore the academic programs at UW-L, Viterbo University and Western Technical College and learn about college admissions and financial aid processes. They hear of SSP's Locally Grown Scholarships and other supports available to them. Together, they examine the anxieties, fears, and misgivings that come with the major decisions and transitions. At the end of the semester, participants map the next steps in their educational journeys with information, skills and a new confidence.

SSP is offered each September and January with on-site childcare and simple supper. There is no cost for this program. Although created with single parents in mind, SSP welcomes non-parents and partnered parents, as well. An application is required and available at www.uwlax.edu/ssp.

For more information, call 608.785.8733 or email at ahansen@uwlax.edu.

About the Couleecap Skills Enhancement Program

The Couleecap Skills Enhancement Program provides support and financial assistance for tuition, child care, and transportation expenses related to returning to school. Available to working adults with low-income, the Skills Enhancement program helps to increase family earned income and access to employer-sponsored benefits by providing support needed to achieve a degree or certificate.

Applications for the Skills Enhancement Program are accepted year-round in Crawford, Monroe, La Crosse, and Vernon Counties. You may apply over the phone or in person.

To learn more or complete an application, contact Aaron Reimler, at 608-782-5525 or Aaron.Reimler@couleecap.org. To fill out an application online, visit www.couleecap.org/bus.html.

I am most proud of becoming a UW-L student. My education ended in my junior year of high school and later earned an HSED. I never thought I was smart. It means a lot to me to share with my family and friends that I'm a university student...a big deal. It is something that must be earned. With the help of SSP, I can say that I have earned it. I love learning.

I enjoy learning which is something I never have. I'm excited to actually use my life experiences and get the correct terminology to understand my life and others even better. It has given me confidence in who I am becoming as a non-traditional adult student. The word "resilience" I learned has stuck with me and I hold onto through my hard times. I want to express my sincere thanks for having faith in my abilities as a student. It feels good to know there is something out there for single mothers that support our dreams of obtaining a college education. My daughter and I truly thank you very much. SSP helped me realize I am not alone.

Couleecap, Inc. is a private non-profit 501(c)3 charitable organization created in 1966. Our mission is to fight poverty and promote self-sufficiency, economic development, and social justice. We are People Helping People, and every day our actions make a difference in the lives of people and families throughout the Coulee Region. We currently implement more than 50 contracts in the areas of housing, emergency assistance, child and family development, business development, employment, transportation, and health services. Each year, Couleecap helps more than 22,000 people work towards self-sufficiency and realizing a better tomorrow. Visit our website at couleecap.org or connect with us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [YouTube](#).

Special thanks to our guest author Andrea Hansen, Self-Sufficiency Program Director, UW-La Crosse

Works Cited

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