

WHO CARES?

*The Experiences of Students with Children
at the University of Victoria*



*A report submitted to
David Turpin, President, University of Victoria*

by

Barbara Whittington

Martha McAlister

Helvi Apted & Michelle Dale

February 2004

WHO CARES?

*The experiences of students with children
at the University of Victoria*

Objective 4:

To provide a learning environment that builds the sense of community possible at a university where the majority of students come from outside the local region

A Vision for the Future:
A Strategic Plan for the University of Victoria, 2002: 13

prepared by

**Barbara Whittington
Martha McAlister
Helvi Apted & Michelle Dale**

**with support from the
Equity & Human Rights Office**

**February 2004
Victoria, British Columbia**

CONTENTS

Prefaces	iii
Acknowledgement.....	v
Executive summary.....	vi
 1. Introduction – Questions we asked, stories we heard	 1
Debates and perspectives	1
Emerging questions	1
Lessons from children	2
Supporting students with children	2
Private impacts	2
Public consequences	3
 2. Methods – what we did	 4
University Equity and Fairness Review Panel	4
“Baby Steps” – the next stage	4
Deepening the perspective	5
A snapshot view of life for students with children	6
Who did we miss?	6
Methods of analysis	6
 3. What we learned from students, staff and faculty	 7
Three students – three realities	7
Dola	7
Eliza.....	8
Kira	9
Conclusion	10
Central themes and ideas for change	11
i. Finances	11
Student loans	12
Challenges for international students with children	12
Grants, bursaries and scholarships	13
Experiences in financial aid	13
What are the costs of being a student with children?	15
ii. Childcare	16
Excellent care	16
Cost of childcare	16
Fees for childcare at UVic	16
Waitlist for UVic’s childcare	17
Part-time / full-time childcare	17
Off-campus childcare	17
Babysitting services / drop-in / respite care	18
iii. Housing	18
On-campus family housing	18
Housing for children with disabilities	19

	Diversity in on-campus family housing	19
	Family Centre	20
	Off-campus housing	20
iv.	Being a student and a parent	21
	Professors – inconsistent support	21
	Shooting for an ‘A’	22
	Missing out – lost opportunities	22
	Advice from parents to parents	23
	Belonging: acceptance, recognition and identity	24
	Benefits: what can the University learn from students	24
	Love	25
	Impacts on the children	25
v.	Culture and Diversity	26
	Diversity: Who benefits? Who pays?	27
	Aboriginal perspectives	27
vi.	Some things are too hard to talk about	28
	Who cares? People, programs and lollypops	29
4.	Now What? – How do we support students with children?	31
	References	35
	Appendices	
I.	Interview questions for students with children	36
II.	Interview questions for UVic staff and faculty	37
III.	Fees for child care services in Victoria	38
IV.	Child care subsidy rate table	39
V.	On-campus family housing	40
VI.	“Students find it tough to put food on the table”	41

PREFACE

In 1986, I arrived at UVic seeking to finish a Bachelor of Arts degree begun in 1978. As a single-mother who had recently experienced the trauma of losing a child, I was overwhelmed by the care and support my son and I received from staff in every facet of the university's administration. From daycare, to financial aid, counselling, admissions, and program advisors, my experience was positive and there was a strong sense of core humanist values as being pervasive throughout the university community. If it had not been for my contact with these individuals and attitudes at that time, I am sure that my future success as a single parent and as a student would have been compromised in the extreme.

Now, fifteen years, a daughter, and two degrees later, I can say that I have chosen the student lifestyle throughout significant portions of my single-parenting career because it has offered, in spite of its particular stresses and challenges, the opportunity for me to be more available to my children as *myself*- a thinking, intellectually stimulated, involved parent. In this sense, although the financial anxieties, trade-offs, and time pressures of student life can be unthinkably daunting, the message of optimism implicit in the taking on of such an experience has no match as a powerful parental communication of hope. And so it is that today, the son who entered the UVic community as a five-year old childcare centre attendee in 1987, is now in the third year of a biochemistry degree and heading for medical school. My seven -year old daughter, also a graduate of UVic childcare services, Family Housing and the Family Centre, will witness me working my way through graduate school. She will, I hope, also choose to bring the themes of pursuit of learning and the awareness of social values to the centre of her life.

It is, therefore, a pleasure and an honour for me to link my voice with the chorus of strength, vitality, courage and purpose I hear within the pages of *Who Cares?* Although the motivation of the report has been to identify the challenges and barriers families face in achieving their educational goals, the energy in this gathering of voices also reveals the passion of the combination of intellectual pursuit and a willingness to speak out for change which renders this aspect of the student population unique. Perhaps one of the most painful and ultimately valuable aspects of being a student parent is that intellectual life offers no escape from the reality of the social inequities which are present in our culture. If you have children, and you are dedicated to thinking, you **have to care** about the gaps between espoused societal beliefs and actual practice, because these gaps have a great influence upon your own experience and integrity as a parent. Because of this, student parents are natural activists, necessarily using the platform of intellectual growth to awaken change in the community at large to what needs to change. Ours are the voices which could play a critical role in leading the institution of the university out of the exclusivity of the past and into a future of positive change. At UVic, I feel lucky to be part of an academic community that has the motivation to both speak about and listen to these issues, and I look forward to witnessing further growth as it strives to integrate the voices of student parents further into educational goals, strategic plans and practices.

Laura Anderson
Graduate Student
Past Chair, UVic Childcare Parents Advisory Board

PREFACE

UVic's Strategic Plan, "A Vision for the Future," which provides a reference point for this report, includes among its fundamental values and principles:

- equal rights and dignity of all persons, and equity in opportunities and employment for all
- environments for work and study that are safe, supportive and healthy, foster mutual respect and civility, recognizing that people are our most important strength.

A key objective, reflecting these values, is to achieve and maintain diversity in our students, faculty and staff. The University is aiming for "inclusiveness."

Our campus is becoming more welcoming to diverse groups of students than ever before and we are all benefiting from this richness of different experiences and perspectives. However, increasing diversity has its challenges. The primary one is recognizing the differing needs and expectations of diverse groups of individuals. It is a challenge to understand and find new, additional or alternative ways of providing equal opportunity for all our diverse population to achieve their potential and to succeed.

Who better to define problems and suggest solutions than those directly involved? This study, by seeking the views of students with children and those who work with them, has done that. Interestingly, this study can serve as a more in-depth companion piece to a recent student survey undertaken by the Senate Committee on the University Budget. The Senate survey looked at the experiences of "non-traditional" students to determine their risk of non-completion of degree. "Single parents" were one of the non-traditional groups identified in the analysis. Inadequate finances, high cost of rent/mortgage, high debt loads, impact of child care on studies, need for part-time child care -- these concerns identified in the Barriers to Completion survey are all elaborated in this study.

The question was posed: "Should the University be involved in providing services for students with children?" The answer can only be YES, if we intend to meet the goals of our Strategic Plan in responding to the needs of our students.

This report Who Cares? begins the task of identifying HOW we might continue.

Linda Sproule-Jones, Director
Equity
University of Victoria

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Who Cares? Like any good community-based project, this is the result of the efforts of many. The greatest thank you goes to the student parents who worked on the project and talked so frankly about their families' experiences. Our commitment to these families and the many who will be coming to UVic in the future is to be able to answer the question posed in the title with the words: the university community does care about you and your family.

The think tank "Baby Steps Toward the UVic Strategic Plan" launched the project. David Clode in Student Services, Hunter McDonald in Campus Security, Deans Anita Molzahn and Michael Prince from the Faculty of Human and Social Development, Linda Sproule-Jones, Equity Issues, Academic VP and Provost Jamie Cassels, all contributed important resources. The staff who added their words of reality ensured that this final report reflects some of the experiences of staff who work on a day to day basis with student parents.

The Family Centre - Barb, Martha, Helvi and Michelle - provided love, persistence and commitment to the completion of the work. On behalf of the families from twenty-five different countries and cultures who make this university a richer and more vibrant learning and living community, let us ensure that we work together to make UVic live up to our words.

Heartfelt thanks to all the young artists for their colour, vision and word !

(and to Jane Brett, in the Equity Office, who sees the importance of the work and helped us with the final touches)

Front Cover:

- ♥ **(right)** *Hi. My name is Emily. My mom is a student in Victoria. It's a good university but she is at school a lot of the time though. Some-times my mom goes different places and my grandma comes over from England to baby sit.*
- ♥ **(left)** *Amy, age 7: My Mom is Great !*
- ♥ **(bottom)** *My name is Charlotte. My mom is Fiona. She works in UVic and she is a student at UVic and she loves it very much. And I love my mom.*

Back Cover

- ♥ **(top)** *Hi! My name's Chaeyeon Song. I'm from Korea. After kindergarten I went to Phillippine. I had a cat named Tiger. But after a year I left Phillipine and I couldn't take Tiger with me. So my parents send him to my aunt, my cousin and my uncle who are still in Phillippine. I am in Canada now. My mom and dad works in UVic. I have an older sister too. I like her... I feel sad that I'm not going to be with my sister next year because she'll be in the other school. But it's still fun living here.*
- ♥ **(middle)** *My name's Soyeon Song. I'm from South Korea and I'm eleven years old. I have a nine year old sister named Chaeyeon. My mom and dad studies at UVic. I go to Frank Hobbs Elementary School and will go to Arbutus Secondary School. I like living here because I have so many friends and I like learning different culture!*

♥ **(bottom)** *Hi, my name is Kelly and I am 11 years old. I love the Family Centre because I have millions of friends. It is really cool here !*

Executive Summary

Intentions

Two research questions guided our work: ***“What are the needs of students with children? What is the role of the University in meeting those needs?”*** Our goal, in conducting this research, was to explore the experiences of students with children at the University of Victoria; to summarize these experiences in a narrative report; and to submit a final report, with recommendations, to the offices and individuals who provide information and services to the students of UVic.

Two of those involved in this project, Barb Whittington and Martha McAlister, both work with UVic’s Family Centre. The challenges and inequities that they have witnessed while in these positions have led them to recognise the need for an essential shift in attitudes towards students with children and to advocate for better information and more resources across the University and locally. The community development model of UVic’s Family Centre has inspired other universities in the U.S. and Canada, to seek guidance when developing their own campus family resources. Showing leadership in supporting non-traditional students is important.

Who spoke? Who listened?

On February 11, 2003, representatives from the Family Centre met with the University Equity and Fairness Review Panel. Inspired by this initial presentation, a group of researchers, students, faculty and staff from the University of Victoria created a think-tank, called “Baby Steps”, or agreed to be interviewed, to explore the issues that were raised at the Panel.

This report, entitled: *Who cares? The experiences of students with children at the University of Victoria*, includes suggestions from staff, faculty and students for how the University of Victoria could develop and provide more support for students with children while also outlining the private impacts and public consequences that occur when students with children do *not* receive the support that they need.

Throughout this research process we referred to *A Vision for the Future: A Strategic Plan for the University of Victoria, 2002*, finding, in this plan, many essential ideals which, when fully implemented, will transform the educational experience at UVic. We agree that:

We must work to ensure that the University remains accessible to all, and that there are no hurdles to participation except academic and creative potential (UVic’s Strategic Plan, 2002: 8).

What did we hear?

During our think-tank and through the interviews with students, staff and faculty, six main themes emerged: finances; childcare; housing; the challenges and rewards of being a student and a parent; culture and diversity; and a section called “Things that are too hard to talk about”, that addresses the effects of stress on students with children. In this report, we also present scenarios based on the lived experiences of three students with children at UVic so as to give faces to the issues. During the section on “finances”, we include a composite scenario, based on two students’

experiences, to highlight the financial and emotional costs of being a student with children. Throughout the report, and in the appendices, we include specific information regarding the availability and costs of housing, childcare and other needs.

Recommendations

Recommendations appear throughout the report, from students, staff and faculty, and are summarized at the end. They include:

1. The University should identify new students with children.

Many students and administrators suggested that a ‘tick-box’, to allow students to indicate if they have children, could be included on all registration and re-registration forms in order to help UVic to identify this emerging equity group.

2. Information should be available before students with children arrive at UVic and in an ongoing way.

Students described the need for more timely information on major issues, such as housing, childcare, financial aid, family counselling and program requirements as well as on less pressing issues, such as recreation options, playgrounds, good public schools and babysitting.

3. The University should help students to connect to pre-existing networks.

All students take some time to get oriented to the experience of being at University; however, students with children have to do this for themselves, their children and, possibly, their partners. They need information that will help them to cope with being parents and students.

4. Increased funding and facilities for childcare are essential.

If students with children are to be given an opportunity to reach their academic potential, affordable, flexible options for quality child care services must exist that will meet the needs of all who require them.

5. The University should create bursary and loan policies that provide greater support for students with children.

Students with children need to have access to clear and consistent information about bursaries and loans and they need access to grants that will help them to avoid an exorbitant debt-load.

6. There should be clear information about wait-lists, for on-campus family housing and UVic child care services. This would help people to be better prepared financially and mentally.

This point was raised most frequently by students who had relocated in order to attend UVic; suggesting that the challenges of adjusting to a new city or country were complicated by a lack of clear information.

7. Create a family-friendly campus

If children feel welcomed and at-home, parents are relieved of a significant stressor and are able to concentrate more on their academics.

8. UVic should take a leadership role in providing innovative support to students with children.

We need an attitude shift that would underlie everything. The University should ask, “What can we do?” – rather than succumbing to the attitude that so often prevails, the attitude that says, “We can’t deal with that, it’s outside of our realm” (Martha McAlister, Director of UVic’s Family Centre).

In its strategic plan, *A Vision for the Future*, and through many of its existing services, the University has demonstrated its desire to create an equitable learning environment for all students, including those students who have children. This report is meant to serve as both a review of what already exists and as a catalyst for greater innovation and deeper support, at all levels, for students with children.

People are what make our university: students, faculty, staff and alumni. Our principal focus in the years ahead must be on these people. Our goal is to recruit and retain a diverse group of exceptionally talented students, faculty and staff and to support them in ways that allow them to reach their highest potential. Our commitment to diversity, equity, quality and a supportive environment will be paramount (UVic’s Strategic Plan, 2002: 12).

Introduction – Questions we asked, stories we heard

“What are the needs of students with children? What is the role of the University in meeting those needs?” A group of researchers, students, faculty and staff from the University of Victoria participated in a think-tank, called “Baby Steps”, or agreed to be interviewed, in order to explore these questions. Students with children who were interviewed for this project clearly expressed that they do need support to experience success in their university education. This report, entitled: *Who cares? The experiences of students with children at the University of Victoria*, tells the stories of some of these students while describing and analysing what is meant by ‘support’. This report also includes suggestions from staff, faculty and students for how the University of Victoria could develop and provide more support for students with children.

This report is written for staff and faculty at the University of Victoria who work with students. While reading it, please keep in mind your professional roles and responsibilities, as well as those of your department and the University as a whole. Communities exist as a place where people should be able to provide and receive care and support.

Debates and perspectives

Our research indicated that debate exists as to how – or even *if* – UVic should respond to the needs of students with children. At some level, this debate is framed as being a question of limited resources; at a deeper and perhaps more pervasive level, there appears to be a philosophical difference of opinion, where some believe that the University does not have a legitimate role in supporting students with children. A number of staff discussed the perceived need for the University to draw a line between the responsibilities of the University and the responsibilities of provincial or federal governments and the wider community.

This report includes references to a diversity of positions and encourages further debate; however, there were far more voices that echoed UVic’s *Strategic Plan*’s vision of valuing a community that supports all students – including those with children. This position will be centralized in this research report:

We ... recognize the importance of meeting the educational needs of a rapidly changing population in this region. Our goal is to establish UVic as a recognized cornerstone of the community, committed to the social, cultural and economic development of our region and nation (UVic’s Strategic Plan, 2002: 24).

Emerging questions

Questions and issues that were discussed throughout this research project, included:

- How can the University and the larger community support students with children?
- How could the voices of students, and their children, be integrated into the University of Victoria’s planning processes, such as the Housing Plan and the Campus Plan?
- How might supporting students with children strengthen the University community?
- What are the implications and consequences of failing to provide adequate support?

This report will not provide answers to all of these questions – that was never our intention. Rather, it is our goal to provoke discussions and to inspire a shift in attitudes that will

lead to a more equitable and supportive atmosphere for students with children at UVic and across Canada.

Lessons from children

In *A Vision for the Future: A Strategic Plan for the University of Victoria* (2002) the University of Victoria states a goal:

to recruit and retain a diverse group of exceptionally talented students, faculty and staff and to support them in ways that allow them to achieve their highest potential (p.12).

This goal acknowledges the value of nurturing an atmosphere that is free of barriers and rich in cultural diversity. From a cultural perspective, the family is a key concept for how all people understand and arrange their lives; indeed, attention to family is at the very essence of being human. In our research, when we asked how families contribute to the University community, one of UVic's chaplains answered:

Students with children remind us of the fuller human context – and ultimate purpose of education – a person's family is part of their process of growth and learning. Most religions would agree that people are not defined by their jobs, their degrees or their salaries, but rather by the love, meaning and growth they experience in their relationships. Students with children can help remind us all about the priorities that bring true happiness and meaning to life (UVic staff).

Or, as one of students involved in this project said: *"With kids and family, you always feel life is meaningful, you learn with purpose"* (Jay).

Supporting students with children

Despite the affirmations that children can enrich a student's educational experience, we also discovered that for those students who lacked the necessary supports, having children could represent a significant barrier to accessing education and experiencing success with their studies. Supporting students with children can mean:

- providing more financial support to students with children;
- increasing flexible, available and affordable day-care services;
- improving accessibility of student housing;
- educating faculty about the different realities of students with children;
- creating a family-friendly campus by establishing play-spaces for children and youth; and
- strengthening pre-existing resources, such as the Family Centre.

Private impacts

Students with children who do *not* receive support are more likely to experience the following challenges:

- taking longer (or failing) to complete a degree program;
- deciding not to pursue a graduate degree, even if the academic potential exists, because the thought of continuing to juggle school and family is too daunting;
- an increase in stress – which can lead to depression, violence or family breakdown;

- the active or passive neglect of children;
- an awareness, for many students, that they could not fulfill their potential in classes, due to multiple demands on their time in addition to fatigue, and anxiety; and
- a regret that they did not have the energy, time or resources to play and have fun with their children – a loss to both the students and their children.

Public consequences

In addition to the personal challenges mentioned above, participants also described more far-reaching consequences of failing to support students with children:

- students might decide not to continue at UVic for graduate work;
- students might not recommend UVic to other students as a family-friendly environment;
- the University might have difficulties in recruiting and retaining PhD students, a rich seedbed for future faculty;
- particularly for international students, the absence of family-friendly services can contribute to feelings of discrimination and alienation; and
- from a holistic perspective, the entire university community misses out on the richness of having a diverse student body.

More than anything, it is important to recognise that this is an opportunity for the University of Victoria to model leadership within Canadian and international universities. In the short term, this leadership will require resources, vision and good will to create genuine support for students with children – but what a lost opportunity if we turn away.

Methods ... what we did

Like most families and communities, the methodology for this research project resembles a dynamically evolving relationship, rather than a clear and predetermined plan – there have been unexpected connections and alliances, with contributions from many different sources.

Since it began, in the mid-1990s, the Family Centre – which has been coordinated by Barb Whittington, for the past six years, and directed by Martha McAlister, for the past two years – has been involved in many of the issues that affect students with children. The Family Centre's location, in one of the on-campus family housing units, creates opportunities for students with children to make friends and find support. During the last year, due to funding cuts within the University, the Family Centre has found itself in the difficult role of pleading the case for its own existence. From this, came a desire to learn more about the experiences of students with children and the services that support these students.

University Equity and Fairness Review Panel

On February 11, 2003, representatives from the Family Centre were invited to meet with the University Equity and Fairness Review Panel. Four students and four of their children, along with Martha McAlister and Barb Whittington, told the panel about life as a student with children. In their lively presentation they highlighted:

- the stress of juggling studies and raising children;
- financial difficulties;
- the challenges of finding and affording flexible daycare; and
- the struggle to coordinate school, children and, in many cases, a job to afford it all.

“Baby Steps”- the next stage

The University of Victoria is committed to the value of: “Equal rights and dignity of all persons, and equity in opportunities and employment for all” (UVic's Strategic Plan, 2002: 6).

In response to the presentation to the University Equity and Fairness Review Panel, leaders within the Equity Office, who share our sense that the needs of students with children could be defined as an issue of equity and fair treatment, offered to work with the Family Centre to design a problem-solving ‘think-tank’. The purpose of this think-tank, that we called “Baby Steps”, was to discover: *“What is the experience of students with children?”* Staff and faculty were invited to join students in exploring the issues that impact students with children and in creating positive and practical responses.

The “Baby Steps” think-tank, which was coordinated by Barb Whittington, took place in April 2003, with a diverse and engaged group of staff, faculty and students in attendance. One of the central themes that emerged from this think-tank – the silencing of the experiences of students with children – was well represented by this question from the students:

How do we integrate the University into families and families into the University?

The silence, regarding the return to school of non-traditional students, was expressed in more particular terms by Barb Whittington, when she asked:

How do we create safe, supportive, healthy families and recognize people as a strength in the university context? (Barb Whittington, faculty coordinator of the Family Centre)

Most of the themes that arose from this think-tank focused on challenges that students with children experience at UVic, which included:

- financial stress – missing out on bursaries because they were not able to attend full-time and a sense that financial services on campus were generally not helpful;
- childcare is expensive and inflexible – there is no childcare available outside of the full-time 9 a.m.-5 p.m. period – making it difficult for students with weekend or night classes;
- housing was difficult to find, with long waits to get into the more affordable, and more convenient, community-spirited, on-campus family housing;
- a frustration with the different standards amongst professors, regarding completing work or writing exams – some were very understanding of the challenges that confront students with children; other appeared to be less compassionate as they penalized late papers;
- some student services, such as counselling and job-information, do not extend to family members;
- many students cited a lack of easily available information regarding many of the above listed challenges; and
- some older students spoke of having an identity crisis – the intensity of this experience might have been mitigated by the faculty.

Deepening the perspective

One suggestion that emerged from the “Baby Steps” think-tank was that it would be helpful to supplement our information by interviewing students, staff and faculty. It was agreed that the results from both the think-tank and the interviews should be organized in the form of a report, which could then be presented to the University.

Initially, we did a survey of what might be available, through the office of Institutional Analysis and Student Services, from which we discovered:

- no orientation for students with children is available;
- no statistics are kept regarding students with children; and
- of the families who live in on-campus housing, over twenty countries are represented, providing a tremendous experience of diversity for all with access to this housing.

In a survey of other universities across Canada, we discovered that very few services are available for students with children – indicating that while UVic has already taken a leadership role through its support of the Family Centre and other family-friendly services, the potential exists for UVic to provide even more innovative support to students with children.

In November 2003, a report entitled *Research on Critical Aspects of Graduate Education at the University of Victoria*, by Dr. Frances Ricks, Dr. Helen Kadlec, Susan Corner and Roxanne Paul, was presented to the University of Victoria. This research project discussed graduate student experiences, with particular attention to timely completion and supervision, but was silent on the issue of students with children. However, it did make one recommendation to the University that could well refer to many of the students in our project – those over 30 years old. Their recommendation regarding the aging graduate students could equally well be applied to students with children.

It is recommended that Graduate Studies promote discussions on new trends such as the age of the graduate student population at the University of Victoria (e.g. 50% over and under the age of 30, with 20% over 40 years of age), varying perspectives on timely completion, and the need for flexible pedagogy and practice to respond to these trends in graduate education. (Ricks, et al., 2003: Synopsis, p. 8)

The 2003 ‘Survey of Barriers to Completion’, prepared by Cheryl Siverston, through Institutional Planning and Analysis at UVic, received completed surveys from 1,128 respondents, 71% of whom were women and 30% of whom were 26 years of age or older. Approximately 4% identified themselves as being single parents; there was no option for students to indicate that they were parents with a partner. Close to 80% of single parents revealed that their income from all sources was not sufficient to cover their costs of living and education for the school year. That same percentage anticipates a debt load upon graduation, with 33% of those predicting that their debt will be in excess of \$40,000. (Cheryl Siverston, *Survey of Barriers to Completion*, 2003).

This quality of research is of huge benefit to the University and it is hoped that more research will follow which will include the specific voices of students with children.

A snapshot view of life for students with children

General invitations to participate in this research project were placed in the Family Centre newsletter, on the bulletin board at the Grad Club, at the Women’s Centre and at various other places on campus. Staff and faculty whose work brings them into contact with students were approached and asked if they would agree to be interviewed. We also met with people who were suggested by students. In total, we interviewed sixteen people: eight staff and faculty, five students with children and, very informally, three children whose parents were students. Most of the interviews were conducted, in person, by a researcher. Those who could not meet face to face were given the option of completing an on-line form. Although we spoke to a relatively small group of people, all of the participants shared rich and detailed stories.

Who did we miss?

Time, money and resources limited the number of people that were interviewed for this research project. As well, we did not capture the experiences of distance students, nor did we interview the children or partners of these students, to hear their stories. The majority of the students who contacted us had already been involved with the Family Centre, causing us to speculate that there might be many more students with children who are less connected to resources and information. Considering the busy lives of these students, we were impressed by, and grateful for, the level of commitment that the participants brought to this research project.

Methods of Analysis

Participants had an opportunity to read and to amend the transcripts and notes of the researcher, after their interviews. Some students made changes because they wanted to add more information or because they felt that they had not expressed their thoughts accurately during the interview. We used thematic analysis to pull themes and frequently cited issues from the data. This report will focus on six themes: finances; childcare; housing; the challenges and rewards of being a student and a parent; culture and diversity; and a section that we call “Things that are too hard to talk about” that speaks to the effects of stress. Recommendations for change will be presented in the final section of this report, under the heading, “Now What?”

What we learned from students, staff and faculty

We must ...be alert to the impact of targeted funding on students from diverse backgrounds. We must work to ensure that the University remains accessible to all, and that there are no hurdles to participation except academic and creative potential (UVic's Strategic Plan, 2002: 8).

How can UVic's powerful promise, as expressed above, in its strategic plan, *A Vision for the Future*, be translated into the creation of an equitable and supportive environment for all who wish to be students, not just the 'traditional students' within the "18 - to- 24 year old population" who are so often the focus of planning discussions (UVic's Strategic Plan, 2002: 9), but also older students and students with children?

We will answer these questions through the words of the students with children who described their experiences during the "Baby Steps" think-tank and through the one-on-one interviews. We will also, in this report, present the views and recommendations of staff and faculty whose work brings them in direct contact with students with children.

Three students – three realities

Who are these students with children? Who spoke to us and what was their message? As noted, we could not, due to the scope of this project, capture all of the experiences of students with children; however, we were grateful that the students who did agree to participate represented some of the major groups implied in this discussion: international students who are here with their partners and children; two-parent families, where one partner might be working, and single parent families. To bring these groups to life we will provide three family scenarios, based on the stories of individuals within these groups:

I. Dola is an international student from India, working on a PhD, with a partner and one child. When he first arrived at the University of Victoria he discovered that there was no housing available on-campus.

In our country, every student has a living place on campus; that was my idea, to live on campus. I applied and there was no space. ... It took one year and eight months to get housing on campus. The way we got the house was through my wife going there every day. There were no other children in the apartment we were living in. Every day we brought [our daughter] to the campus to socialise with other children. (Dola)

Both the director and coordinator of the Family Centre, who know him well, describe Dola as being an incredibly determined student who is always trying to create a plan that will meet the needs of his family, despite the challenges of isolation and logistical tangles.

Housing was just one of the barriers; three other major, linked issues were those of financial challenges, employment options for his wife and childcare for their young daughter.

I didn't have a scholarship, and so I taught to earn \$900 a month, but some months this would be reduced if there was no teaching ... such as in January and September. I

was teaching two courses, it was not enough money, I had some savings and I used that...

We decided my wife would work. ... She has a management degree, but [was] not able to get a job because she needed approval that she is not taking a job away from a Canadian or landed immigrant. We tried to use the career services, but they would not assist because she is not a student. We telephoned the intercultural centre and the immigration and refugee centre, who told her that [she] could apply for a working visa. By immigration [we] were given the information that you must first have a job, then apply for a visa. She applied and got the visa. This whole process took 4-5 months to figure out. (Dola)

Even to an outsider, simply hearing this story, their path can feel terribly confusing – so many steps, so many barriers! If Dola and his wife had not been persistent and creative, it would have been almost impossible for her to make it through this maze of information. Once she found a job, the next challenge became that of finding childcare for their daughter.

[We] first applied [to the University daycare] in 2001 July, [but there was] no space; then checked again in July 2002, but no place. [We] then sent [our daughter] to [an off-campus] pre-school from September 2002 to June 2003; still no daycare at the University. ... At one point [we] were offered a place in the 0-2 daycare, but [by then] our daughter was already 3 and the daycare for 0-2 is more expensive.

[It is] difficult to transport to Gordon Head pre-school [and it] only lasted two and a half hours. In winter, it is too cold to take our daughter along the 20-25 min walk, so must take 2 buses, which takes about one hour to get there, and one hour [to get] back. (Dola)

It wasn't just money problems or the extra work of having to care for a child that made it difficult for Dola to work at a pace that matched his academic potential; it was the lack of timely and useful information and resources – such as financial aid, housing, cultural isolation and childcare. All of these challenges had a direct impact on his ability to perform academically.

II. Eliza

For some students, it is not always possible to control the timing of having a family and returning to school. Indeed, for those women who are *not* in the 18-24 age group of the “traditional student”, the timing for studying and having children will almost inevitably overlap.

Eliza is a Masters student who was a nurse practitioner in a northern community before moving to Victoria to continue her studies, with a young child and her husband, who is also a graduate student. Due to their desire to balance classes and studying with the need to be as involved as possible in the early years of their child, they decided that part-time daycare would be the best solution for their family.

Unfortunately, upon arriving at UVic, she discovered that although the University offers excellent on-campus daycare, it is only available if the child is registered for full-time daycare. In trying to understand her options, Eliza proposed the following choices: her first choice was to access part-time daycare at part-time fees; next, she asked if she could pay full-time daycare fees, but only have her child attend part-time; finally, she enquired if she could share a full-time place with another family who also wanted part-time daycare. None of these options were permitted by

the UVic daycare. From what she gathered, UVic's Child Care Service is one of the few in Canada that does not offer part-time daycare for the children of students.

This was only one stressor of many for Eliza and her family, but one that she considers to be a profound deterrent to students with young children. She could not choose to leave the campus for a better daycare option, because, in Victoria, there are no licensed group daycare services that offer part-time placements. It's all or nothing.

While she was a student at UVic, she had another child, which made it difficult for her to attend classes full-time. Although she was an "A" student, the lack of affordable and available daycare made it difficult for her to attend full-time classes, which meant that she did not qualify for those bursaries and scholarships that require full-time attendance, regardless of personal circumstances. During this time, despite being very busy, Eliza made a major contribution to her University community by advocating for a change to Masters' regulations that unfairly penalized students who took a term off from school. In her case, she needed to take a term off to have her second child – not everyone might have that particular reason, but, in life, interruptions do occur – more often when a student is also a parent.

During our "Baby Steps" think-tank, Eliza stated that although she plans to seek a PhD program once she has completed her Masters, she would not consider UVic, due to their lack of family-friendly policies around childcare and bursaries. Both the coordinator and director of the Family Centre believe that her decision to go elsewhere for her PhD represents a huge loss to UVic, as she is an exceptional student, both academically and in terms of how she shares her rich life experiences in the classroom and with her community. As significantly, her decision reflects poorly on the atmosphere that confronts students with children at UVic.

III. Kira

For those of us who are students *or* parents, women like Kira inspire awe and respect – not only is she a mature student, who has returned to school full-time; she is also a single mother raising two young children. Being a single parent and a student is often overwhelming. Many give up. For some of these students, issues of custody and marital breakdown prove to be all-consuming distractions that make even the most fascinating assignment unthinkable. The stories that we heard from this group of students with children were among the ones that best captured the enormity of trying to juggle school and parenting.

Kira is an undergrad student who returned to school in 1999 with the intention of developing the skills and resources needed to support herself and her family (two daughters who are now 7 and 11 years old) into a future that no longer included a partner. For her degree program, she had to complete two practicums, both of which involved working long days, after which she would pick up her children from after-school care, prepare dinner, assist her children with their homework, get them to bed and then start on her own homework. With so much to do, Kira often felt that her children were getting too little of her attention and affection but she couldn't find a way to create more time or energy to go around.

One might wonder: how is this different from a parent who is working while raising children? How are students different from working parents? In our discussions, during the "Baby Steps" think-tank and the interviews, we agreed that there are a number of factors implied in being a student with children that tend not to apply to working parents:

- financial insecurity is almost always a challenge for students with children;

- many students with children must move their family to a new city to access education;
- school, with its assignments, exams, and deadlines, creates a very stressful environment;
- students with children might feel that they lack a peer group that shares their reality;
- students with children often miss out on social, cultural and recreational activities that are available for students, or for parents their age who don't have homework; and
- with school work it is very difficult to create boundaries on one's time – the job is never done. It is no accident that many of us, as adults, still have nightmares that involve unfinished homework or being unprepared for an exam.

In the University setting, Kira does not find that children and families are valued or that the University understands how children's needs must be the first priority for most students with children, with a practicum or a paper coming second. One way that this is manifested is in the inconsistent implementation of policies regarding late papers: for some professors, submitting an essay two weeks late is not an issue; for others, that same late paper will be penalized two grades. The attitudes of one's classmates also vary widely, between support and judgement, suggesting that this is an excellent opportunity for the University to accept a leadership role in visibly supporting students with children.

Currently, many professors or instructors are not even aware that an 'Academic Concession Form' exists. Samples of these can be found on the UVic web-site, but it would be far more supportive and transparent if all course outlines contained an example of one of these forms and if they were discussed during orientation sessions to new programs. One section in the 'Academic Concession form' is labelled 'Family Affliction' – a somewhat negative interpretation of what might, more accurately, be referred to as 'Family Responsibilities'.

Financial stress can often be another major challenge. For Kira, it was crucial for her to find a way to complete her practicum and her coursework in order to graduate in June. She had received the maximum amount of student loans and needed to begin paying it off – a \$60,000 student-loan debt is a daunting weight; a risk that might discourage many potential students, especially those who have the added expense of caring for children and all of their needs.

Conclusion

Students like Dola, Eliza and Kira are no longer the exceptions in the classroom, as more and more people return to school outside of the traditional 18-24 year old range in an effort to improve their lives and the lives of the families. If UVic believes in the value of “***nurturing a humane and student-centred culture***” (UVic's Strategic Plan, 2002: 8), it must remember that for many of our students, children are the centre of their lives and cultures.

Central Themes and Ideas for Change

The University ... sees education as crucial not only to economic progress but to constructive citizenship (UVic's Strategic Plan, 2002: 8).

The scenarios that were described above, in the stories of Dola, Eliza and Kira, were not isolated individual experiences; to the contrary, much of what they described was echoed in our discussions with other students, faculty and staff. Almost everyone agreed that in order for a student to experience success, the whole student must be considered:

The University is not doing enough to support students with children. We try not to acknowledge how hard it is for parents to manage. We don't bring it up. We focus on the 18-19 year old students and how hard it is for them, the adjustments they need to make, but we don't look to the situation of students with children (UVic staff).

Students with children are an invisible minority (Martha McAlister, Director of the Family Centre).

Throughout the research process, we heard from students with children who felt overwhelmed, anxious, stressed and dismayed, some of which could perhaps be attributed to the shock of arriving in a foreign country or a new city. However, many of these challenges were directly connected to the lack of useful and timely information with regards to such key issues as finances, housing and childcare. We received the sense from students with children that the University of Victoria is not able to understand that the life of a student with children is fundamentally different from that of the life of an 18-24 year-old, single "traditional student".

During the think-tank and the interviewing process, we were struck by how, on the one hand, the students' experiences were remarkably similar: the challenges faced by one student seemed to bounce like mirror images against another person's apparently isolated experience. On the other hand, the students' experiences were distinctive: each interview, meeting or phone call revealed a new perspective. In this respect, the goal of the project – to gain an overall understanding of the issues facing students with children – has been met, while also leaving room for accepting that much remains unexplored.

i. Finances

Every day I was writing up budgets, trying to get this out of that, the amount of time I spent fiddling around with money was ridiculous (Annie).

We wanted money to survive; it affected my research. I was writing many chapters before my wife began work, now it has been difficult to finish one. (Dola)

All of the participants in this study identified financial issues as being one of the major barriers facing families. Money, or the lack thereof, directly impacts on other issues that are central to the success of students with children, such as: access to suitable housing, childcare and transportation, all of which can determine how quickly and successfully a student will complete his or her degree, which, in turn, has implications for students who depend on student loans or for those who are carrying debt from other sources. Students with children and a partner with a job, also face a number of challenges when trying to access scholarships and bursaries. In those cases where funding is available, it is often inadequate.

Student loans

One staff member spoke passionately about the financial challenges that face students with children:

I don't understand the societal issues around borrowing to raise children ... to me that is a crime ... and I would like to see that remedied, because I think that ... is a source of a huge amount of excessive debt that students carry. Invariably the students I have met that have the most severe debt burdens are those who are raising children. ... Debt is also psychologically disturbing; it creates real strains on families (UVic staff).

An interview with a staff member of Student Awards and Financial Aid, also revealed troubling financial details. She explained that a single parent, regardless of the number of children, is eligible for a maximum of only \$14,790 for eight months of study. For twelve months, the maximum amount available through student loans is \$22,185 – this has to cover everything, including tuition, books, housing, childcare, food, and other essential needs. The student loan limit for single people has increased over the past few years, while remaining constant for students with dependants. Many parents survive by depending on the child tax rebate, and the accumulation of a parallel debt through a line of credit or credit cards.

Students, who are using student loans as their primary source of income, must enrol for courses through the summer, or face the prospect of having no income. For these students, taking a respite from the stress of studies and spending time with their families over the summer is an impossibility, unless they are able to access alternative funding. For many students with children, taking a full-time course load is not in balance with their family responsibilities, especially if they are single parents with more than one child. Bureaucratic definitions regarding full-time versus part-time status may confuse some students with children; however, all of them are clear that they are full-time parents – regardless of their course load.

University staff identified the need for provincial and federal governments to address the issue of maximum funding available for students with children. The maximum has been established to ensure that students do not increase their student loan debt to an unmanageable level, which nobody desires, especially not students; indicating the need for stronger grant and bursary programs. The budget for needs-based awards must also be reviewed and increased within the University.

Financial and Employment Challenges for International Students with Children

For two years neither of us has found a job. We have had two interviews between us and a couple of offers of part-time jobs, but there are no good jobs. ... Maybe because of our English, but we read and write better than we can speak. We don't know why. Most people, if you talk to immigrants, say BC is not friendly. ... Jobs I am qualified for, I don't even get an interview. In Toronto I hear it is better (Layla).

International students with children are often faced with the extra complications of trying to access information and services from another country. During an interview with a staff member who supports international and exchange students – it was explained that there is very limited financial aid available for international students; they cannot work in Canada, but their partners

can, if they have a work permit. However, the process for gaining a work visa can be lengthy and confusing. For international students, tuition at UVic is three times higher than for Canadian citizens – at UBC it is six times higher. In addition, international students must pay tuition for the year up front and prove that they have enough money to be able to live independently for the rest of the academic year, approximately \$12,000.

Grants, Bursaries and Scholarships

There aren't a lot of students ... who [can maintain a 100% course load] and manage a family, with a GPA that is high enough to qualify for scholarships. There are some, but the numbers are fairly small (UVic staff).

Due to the responsibilities of raising a family, many students need to study part-time; however, there are very few bursaries and grants available for students who are enrolled in part-time study or for students in need. To be eligible for scholarships, a student must be registered in fifteen credits over a twelve-month period and have a GPA of at least 8 (i.e. an A average). Scholarships generally only see number of credits and GPA; they do not recognise all of the other commitments that students might be fulfilling. Students, staff and faculty all expressed the opinion that there is a growing need for part-time scholarships if this system is to be seen as fair and equitable.

Even a relatively small amount of money can have a significant impact on students and their families in terms of reducing stress. Scholarships, grants or bursaries support the emotional and academic success of students by offering a sense of recognition and acknowledgement and by providing very concrete assistance. For example, one student, with a partner and four children, could only afford to take one or two classes per term, due to limited finances, which meant that a two-year program became stretched over a five year period.

They weren't huge fees, \$225 for each course, but it's hard when you don't have it (Annie).

When this same student received a grant of \$1,000 she was able to take four courses in a single summer, allowing her to complete her degree.

For sole support parents, we see so few who are taking more than the minimum course requirements in order to be eligible for a loan, just because of their limited energy and time (UVic staff).

Experiences in Financial Aid

I got one of three childcare bursaries. I appreciate that. It was a big help. We didn't get it in the first year because we didn't know [about its existence] (Jay).

While some students reported very positive experiences in obtaining information or advice that led to them receiving financial assistance, many others reported that they were given incorrect information. In particular, students described being told that they were not eligible for funding only to discover, later, that funding was available, or applying anyway and receiving significant loans or grants based on measurable need. In addition, some students say that they found their interactions with certain staff members of the Student Awards and Student Aid office to be humiliating, and unsupportive. If these reports are accurate, this is certainly unfortunate in terms

of quality of service and one can only imagine how this poor treatment made the experience of asking for help that much more discouraging.

I was told I wouldn't be eligible for a student loan, but I applied anyway, and ended up getting the full amount, so it was actually a big mistake [on the part of the staff person] ... I didn't find the interactions very helpful at all. ... Another neighbour [who] was a single mum ... and a full-time student ... was told to get a job. (Beatrice).

I applied for a student loan and they gave me a grant ... because they give grants to people who don't have the money to live on. I hadn't realised that we were so 'low income'. At the time that I qualified for a grant, nobody in financial aid told me that they existed and nobody in financial aid told me that we would probably qualify for one. They were just sort of hostile to me, made me cry, made me feel like I was begging them to take money out of their own pocket to give to me for my education. [It felt like] they were evaluating me and thinking, "Well, God, at her age, she shouldn't be needing it", and you know, keeping their hands firmly in their pockets (Annie).

What are the financial and emotional costs of being a student with children?

(A composite scenario)

My name is Maria. I'm a mother, with two children – a two-and-a-half year old daughter in daycare, and a son who started high school this year. I'm also a student, in my third year of an Honours under-graduate degree with hopes to go on to grad school. I moved here eighteen months ago from a small town in Northern BC. I'm learning so much and my kids have opportunities here that they didn't have back home, but it's also incredibly difficult. I miss the support of my mom and my sister ...

My daughter needs a lot of attention – she's young and I feel badly that she's in daycare all day, but I can't get any work done when she's home. And I worry about my son. He's a teenager and I'm not always available for him. Their dad means well, I think, but he lives up North and he hasn't been able to give me any child support since we moved down here. I can't deal with that right now. I just can't.

I've been lucky in other ways – a friend of mine told me about Family Housing, so I applied when I first started thinking about school and I got in. We have a 2-bedroom apartment ... my son has his own room, while my daughter and I share. We're on the list for a three-bedroom townhouse, but there are only three of them in on-campus housing, and I don't think my chances are great. Anyway, it could be worse. If I were living off-campus I'd probably be in a basement suite and it would be a huge challenge to get everyone to school and daycare on the bus. And I was fortunate to get my daughter into the UVic daycare. It's expensive, but they take such good care of her.

I've had to take out the maximum student loan every year to do this...\$22,185 – and to get that I have to take classes right through the summer, which means that none of us gets a break. That money has to cover tuition and books and food and rent and everything else. I try to be careful, but a toddler and a teenager can't share a lot of things.

And then in October my favourite auntie died and we had to go home for the funeral. My family is supportive of me being here, but I still have responsibilities in my home community. I hadn't budgeted for that financially. And emotionally it made it really hard for me to focus through mid-terms.

So, yes, it's great to be here, to know that I am preparing to get work that will be meaningful and will support my kids and myself. But all the time I'm thinking – what if it doesn't work out? *What have I done?* I make lists of what it costs and what I have and it never balances out. I think I could handle all the other pressures, if money wasn't on my mind every day and every night. Here's how I calculate it:

Student loan = \$22,185 (for a single parent at school 12-months of the year)

BASIC EXPENSES:

Rent = $\$670 \times 12 =$ **\$8,040/year** (for a two bedroom apartment, on-campus)

Tuition = **\$5,000/year** (it's gone up since I started)

Books = **\$600/year** (I try to buy second-hand)

Daycare = $\$765$ (minus) $\$528$ (childcare subsidy) = $\$237 \times 12 =$ **\$2,844/year**

Food = $\$140/\text{week} =$ **\$7,280/year**

Utilities = $\$200 \times 12 =$ **\$2,400/year** (this includes heat, hydro, phone)

Total = **\$26,164**

This total doesn't include clothing, field trips at school for my son, school supplies, a bus pass for my son, emergencies, holidays, birthday presents, life. I can't take a break because I need to go to school full-time to maintain my student loans. Plus, tuition is going up all the time –I have to get through this quickly. I'll do whatever I can to make it work. Some weeks that means going to the food banks in the Student Union Building and downtown. *I have to make this work.*

(See Appendix VI for a news story that covers the issue of food banks in Canadian universities.)

ii. Childcare

They don't really get it ... other students and professors don't understand how hard it is to do both (Beatrice).

When considering the stresses that are faced by students with children, childcare is often heard in the same breath as finances. Although each family's needs are different, childcare does appear to be a more pressing issue than housing, due to its inflexible yet inconsistent nature and due to its direct impact on students' ability to find time to study effectively and successfully.

The exceptional quality of the childcare services that are available through the University of Victoria inspired praise from all of the research participants; however, the high cost and the limited number of flexible places are significant barriers to accessing these wonderful services.

Excellent care

When describing UVic's childcare services, parents praised its excellent educational standards, its stimulating environment and its caring and nurturing staff and atmosphere. International students spoke of the importance of their children having the opportunity to attend the UVic daycare as a way to become familiar with other children living in family housing and with Canadian culture. For all students, the close proximity of the daycare made it feel safe and it gave students the possibility of visiting their children in between classes or at lunch.

Cost of Childcare

The cost of childcare is prohibitive in many cases (UVic staff).

For every parent who praised UVic's childcare services, there were as many who expressed concern about the expense of these services, which can represent a significant barrier to access. UVic's Child Care Services, although competitive, are more expensive than other licensed daycares in Victoria because they "offer a quality program with well trained and educated Child Care Staff" (UVic staff). Although most parents would agree that this is what they want for their children, the fees are still a shock to someone trying to get by on a Student Loan or a loan and a part time job.

Fees for child care services at UVic

- Infant Care (6-18 months of age): **\$891/month**
- Toddler Care (19-36 months): **\$765/month**
- Early Childhood Care (37 months – 5 years): **\$582/month**
- School Age Care (6 - 12 years): **\$221/month**

Parents who apply for and receive a subsidy would pay the difference between what subsidy covered and the fee charged. Information on the subsidy program can be found at the government website: www.mcaws.gov.bc.ca/childcare/index.htm (UVic staff).

Some students claimed that the fees at UVic are much higher than other childcare services in Victoria (See Appendix III) – requiring them to place their children off-campus, at a distance that increased the time and energy stresses of both the student and the child. Parents with minimal income may be eligible for childcare subsidies, through the provincial government. (See

Appendix IV). However, for infant care, even with a full subsidy of \$585/month, childcare would still cost \$339/month.

I didn't know how hard it would be financially...paying for childcare, which is even worse when one partner works. You end up having to pay the full amount for UVic childcare (Beatrice).

Wait-list for UVic's Childcare

We were so lucky – after we moved into family housing, we got a place in child-care. Since last June we feel our life is a lot easier. Before that it was just a nightmare (Jay).

Waiting for a vacancy at UVic's childcare service has taken as much as one-two years for some students. This is very frustrating for parents and can cause huge pressures on study and work. As well, students told us that not being able to see their place on the wait-list made planning for the future difficult and uncertain. This was of extra concern for international students, who often lack the community, family and social supports that offer formal and informal help with childcare arrangements. Many participants, even those who had found a place in UVic's childcare service, expressed the opinion that many more places are required if the University is interested in meeting the needs of all students with children.

According to the staff at UVic's Child Care Services, if parents are wait-listed, they are referred to the Child Day Care Information Service, which provided parents with a listing of various care providers in Victoria.

Part-time / full-time childcare

Jacob waited a year and then lost his day care spot when he was taken out over the summer (Beatrice).

According to official policy, the UVic childcare service is only available on a full-time basis, which means that there is no flexibility in terms of sharing a place with another family or paying full fees but only attending part-time. Unofficially, some families have been allowed to send their children part-time, but not in a way that appears to be fair or consistent, which raises the concern of favouritism and confusing rules. In addition, one participant told us that students are not allowed to take their children out of the child-care service over the summer period, without facing the risk of losing their spot.

Off-campus childcare

Using off-campus childcare facilities presents many challenges, such as the difficulty of arranging transportation to and from the daycare centre, especially in those cases where more than one bus is needed to reach the daycare. For students who are new to Victoria, there is a lack of information on campus regarding alternative, off-campus childcare services.

(See Appendix III for more information on the costs associated with off campus childcare services.)

Baby-sitting service / drop-in / respite care

While informal daycare exchanges have been organized, at various times, by groups of parents and the Family Centre, these require an enormous amount of coordination, planning and good luck and, as a result, their success fluctuates, based on the families involved, their schedules and the drop-in hours of the Family Centre. Not a sustainable or trustworthy system for a parent who needs a guarantee of support so that she or he can attend a class, write an exam or study. Many students spoke of the need for a more formally organized drop-in daycare centre, or daycare co-operative, or respite. Some of the ideas that were presented included:

- reciprocal childcare by parents (although this can be difficult if both parents are students or if a single-parent is involved);
- baby-sitting service on-campus; and
- a drop-in daycare service might be helpful during exam periods, class times or when children cannot accompany parents (i.e. to a meeting).

One student told us that the easiest class she had ever taken was at a college where drop-in childcare was available for students. She has positive memories of being able to drop her children off before class and then simply being a student, free of worries, trusting that her children were safe and having a great time.

Ultimately, it doesn't matter how well a student has arranged childcare or how many choices are available on or off-campus: there will still be times when a child is sick in the middle of the night and, more often than not, there'll be an exam the next day or an important paper to write – but the priorities are clear. Love trumps an "A". How can the University support students in those situations so that they do not need to make the choice between caring for their child and getting assignments in on time?

My family helps me keep my perspective ... I remember that UVic is not my world (Anna).

iii. Housing

For students with children, access (or lack of access) to housing can have a major impact on their ability to manage transportation to classes, childcare, shopping and other essential facilities. As troubling, is the fact that off-campus housing can mean that students and their families will have poor connections to a supportive community or to a sense of place and belonging. These challenges are greater for international students or for those students who have relocated their entire family in order to return to university. For many students and their children and partners, on-campus family housing creates the possibility of community, along with greater access to UVic's childcare services and campus events.

On-campus family housing

Due to the limited availability of family housing, in relation to the demand, long wait-lists have become a stressful part of the admittance process. For a number of international students, clear and accessible information regarding housing was not available on the Internet – students did not feel prepared for the reality of the long wait to enter family housing.

I didn't expect I would have to wait so long to get family housing. In China, all students would be able to get housing or a bed. I don't know what is wrong that the University could not provide housing. I read web-site, had to pay \$20. Don't know

how to pay, from China – how do I pay when they don't accept credit cards? Chinese cheque not accepted. The cost to make a money order plus mail for safety and security it could cost me \$100. At that point I didn't know if I would be admitted, if not, then money lost. ... if I had known how different off-campus was to on-campus housing, I would have paid the \$100 (Jay).

Participants in this research project called for clearer information in packages that are sent out to prospective students and on the UVic website. Participants also suggested that information regarding the waitlist for student housing should be easily available so as to ensure that the system is fair and transparent.

Housing for children with disabilities

One student wrote of her experience of living on campus, with a daughter who had multiple disabilities. During the past six years, this same student remembers two other families who had children with disabilities living on campus. None of these families had wheelchair-accessible housing, often because when moving in the family might not know this is an issue.

I think that families who discover that their kids have disabilities should be bumped to the top of the housing list. ... I also feel that they should be allowed to rent a larger house than normally allowed for the number in one's family – just due to the deluge of equipment needed by the child, such as wheelchairs, walker/trainers, standing frames, physio-balls, physio-mats, and at least two different types of therapeutic chairs. In our case, we used the storage cupboards for our 'stuff', rented a storage unit and paid fees for it downtown, and also bought a shed, which we have outside our unit to try to cope with the overflow (Cecilia).

Diversity in on-campus family housing – challenges and benefits

Objective 1: Ensure the principles of fairness and equity are incorporated into all procedures and activities at the University of Victoria ... (and)

Objective 4: Provide a learning environment that builds the sense of community possible at a university where the majority of students come from outside the local region (UVic's Strategic Plan, 2002: 12-13).

Many of the students who live in on-campus family housing spoke of the benefits that they experienced: they loved that their children were surrounded by friends and they described the deep community connection of living near others who shared similar circumstances. They felt understood, supported and protected. Family Housing and the Family Centre opened doors to rich social, cultural and community life, through gardening, cooking and children. Students talked about the comfort of being awake at two in the morning and looking out the window only to see lights on in neighbouring apartments or townhouses; knowing that others were also studying or soothing a child made life feel normal and more manageable.

Lovely memories. UVic Family housing is a good environment, very safe, I feel quite sure nothing will happen ... child can play easily. I had a good time with Martha (Layla).

Others described some of the potential risks or shortcomings of Family Housing.

The issue is that they are all living in a transient population, it's like being in a military base ... people are coming and going and there's no stability, there's no old wise neighbours. ...Because they're so focused on their education and making ends meet, it may be difficult to create a sense of community, which makes me think that a thing like the Family Centre could be expanded into more of a social role to encourage them to have more social events, try and help them to become ... a part of the community (UVic staff).

Single parent families pointed out that the community in family housing is not always supportive, in part because of academic and domestic stress, but also because living so intimately can create pressure. The multi-cultural nature of Family Housing can also provide a complex mix of benefits and challenges. If facilitators are available through, for example, the Family Centre, the benefits of this multi-cultural milieu can be enhanced and the challenges managed; however, the University needs to take a leadership role in supporting this facilitator function.

Family Centre

Through its potluck dinners, breakfast club, community gardens, pre-school playgroup, toy library, parties, and warm drop-in atmosphere, the Family Centre is the hub of activities for those students who live in on-campus family housing. Therefore, when the hours of operation were recently reduced as a result of a University decision, it was not a surprise that many families expressed dismay and anxiety.

Family Centre was very useful when it was full-time, but when it was part-time, I forgot to go that day. There is restriction on the time [of the students], it is hard to manage and go there when it is open only at certain times... [It] helps with the culture. ... I don't know Western culture, how can I find [out] something? (Layla)

Another student explained that just because a student is not at the Family Centre all the time does not mean that he or she doesn't value it. Knowing of its existence was often the most important support. Others discussed the need to make more students aware of the existence of the Family Centre. At this time, due to its limited budget and scope, the Family Centre can only respond to the needs and issues of those students who live on-campus. It would be very beneficial to students to be able to spread the word and to set up a way to refer students who live off-campus to the services of the Family Centre.

To think that the University didn't support even that resource [full-time hours for the Family Centre] ... is very disheartening (UVic staff).

Off-campus housing

I'm so lonely – those are the words I hear over and over again (UVic staff).

Some families seek off-campus housing out of choice; however, for many, the decision is due to a lack of available housing on-campus. For students with children who relocated to Victoria to pursue an education, especially for international students, but also for students from other parts of Canada, the shortage of available on-campus housing presents many difficulties. Students described the lack of community support and the challenge of finding appropriate spaces for their children to meet and to play with others while living off-campus. Many spoke of the

difficulties of transporting their children to childcare, and themselves to classes. Financially, living off-campus tended to be more expensive. Please see Appendix V for the rent schedule for on-campus housing. In most cases, housing of a similar size and quality could cost an additional \$200/month, or more for the larger units, if living off-campus.

In the past few years, Victoria has been struck with chronic shortages of rental housing. For students who arrive in August, in time to begin school in September, it can be:

harder than Hell to find housing ... that's affordable, safe (UVic staff)

The shortage of on-campus family housing also makes it more difficult to reach students who have children, as the University maintains very limited tracking on students with children. Many families who moved to family housing, after beginning their university experience in off-campus housing, recognise the benefits of living on-campus and, in particular, they appreciate having access to the Family Centre. These students encourage the University to extend the scope of the Family Centre to meet the needs of off-campus students with children.

iv. Being a Student and a Parent

The University should advertise the ... social, cultural and faith community networks that already exist; provide affordable daycare; reform loan and bursary policies; and promote available services such as counselling services, disability support services, chaplain services and international support services. More resources for family counselling would be a great benefit (UVic staff).

This section title might seem repetitive since all the issues that have been discussed until this point – housing, finances, childcare – are tied to the issue of being a student with children. However, this section will focus, in particular, on the experience of being a student while caring for children – the challenge of performing in a competitive, grade-oriented, evaluation-based environment while also attending to the needs of children.

I put a great deal of pressure on myself to do well in many areas, but trying to breastfeed and attend classes and not inconvenience other people took an enormous toll on my health. I am working on my graduate project and am glad to be near completion as the entire process was one of the worst experiences of my life (Anna).

As was noted earlier, due to the pressures of having a family, a high percentage of students with children attend school part-time, which means that certain options, such as scholarships and grants, are not available to them.

Professors – inconsistent support

I was very happy with my department. Very high quality. They accept me having a family. They are very qualified, supportive and professional (Layla).

I have found children are not welcome in the academic setting and as a result I am sometimes not able to meet both my family and my academic obligations. With sick children or childcare cancels, I [cannot] bring them to school or to meetings (Anna).

Students with children often require a different degree of support from their professors than students who do not have children. Children place time and energy constraints on students

that cannot always be managed by being a “better student”. Although many students spoke in positive and grateful terms about the support that they received from their professors, others described punitive experiences. Almost everyone spoke about the need for clear, equitable and transparent policies by which professors are required to work. Students highlighted the issues of being absent from class, late to submit a paper or unable to write an exam as requiring better policies.

More tolerance on absence. ... professors are normally good enough, but it is against the University rules. Better to have actual policy in place to make the professors comfortable to give certain permission. It's up to the professors to close their eyes. If you are sick you have to provide notice in advance – medical certificate – a lot of the time we didn't have that (Jay).

Shooting for an ‘A’

With the extra work of caring for children, many students find it to be more difficult, if not impossible, to be an ‘A’ student – the time for studying simply does not exist. Some feel worn out by this reality and depressed because they know they are not meeting their academic potential and as a result of the lower grades they lose the opportunity to apply for scholarships or certain bursaries.

I'm feeling that I could be doing so much better if I didn't have children. I could be getting better grades; I could be getting work experience. I talk to my friends and I hear what I am missing out on, the experience and the grades (Anna).

In an article about the experiences of mature students it was observed that:

*... mature students have very high standards for themselves. They believe they should get the same marks as the students with no complications in their lives, even if they've been tending to a sick child instead of course work (“Older, Wiser and Hitting the Books”, *Times Colonist*, August 21, 2003: D2).*

While the *Times Colonist* report might be accurate, it misses the point that the University expects students with children to get the same marks as students without children and all the funding and scholarships are based on this expectation. This same article reported that mature students tend to do better academically, however, the researchers for this project believe that many of the mature students who are experiencing academic success do not have a young family.

Missing out – lost opportunities

Objective 13: To increase the opportunities for experiential learning at UVic.

Action: c) examine new forms of experiential learning that meet the needs of students and complement established co-op and practicum opportunities (UVic's Strategic Plan, 2002: 19).

Many students with children expressed disappointment and discouragement at not being able to participate in a full range of student activities, such as group projects, study groups or, on a larger scale, co-op or practicum placements – the lack of which will have a negative impact when students attempt to enter the work place. Students also stated that they feel that the knowledge

that they gain from raising children is not honoured or regarded as holding significant value in the University.

It would be good to put on a resume what you did as a parent, being nine months pregnant with a two-year old and I wrote my exams, for example. At the moment, because I have a family, I have not been able to take up co-op positions and other work experiences to add to my résumé, so at the end I worry that I won't have the experience the others have (Beatrice).

Individuals who do not have children tend not to understand the time constraints. Doing group work was challenging, as there were no other people with young children in any of my groups so they did not understand why I had such limited hours of availability. There was no support from my School in either facilitating understanding or just giving moral support. Teachers were unsupportive (Anna).

Other students developed a philosophical position around all of these challenges – they found ways to cope; strategies that kept everything more or less in balance. More than one student acknowledged that it is healthy not to compare one's own marks or performance with students who don't have children. Indeed, all students with families agreed that *family is more important than school*.

However, even when students held on to this knowledge, there were still moments of absolute fatigue and stress and burnout when the daily stresses of school pressure, time limits and children's needs collided – more often when factors such as finances, childcare and housing were less than optimal.

Students ... are sometimes very isolated, without time to seek our resources through family counselling (UVic staff).

If you don't feel connected to the campus, then you are much more likely to drop out, especially at the beginning, this is shown in the literature on retention (UVic staff).

Advice from parents to parents

- Use every spare minute for schoolwork!
- *We go to the park, they play; I can study. For shopping, my wife takes the kids inside and I study in the car (Dola).*
- Try not to mix parenting and schoolwork – it's better to divide the two. For example, try not to read or study when the kids are around, just enjoy them instead. This strategy only succeeds if you have access to reliable childcare.
- Ask for help.
- *Sometimes it is necessary to ask for help. [Professors] might turn out to be more helpful if they just know you have a family (Beatrice).*
- *Don't sleep and drink lots of caffeine (Anna)* – This is not recommended for older parents who really do need their rest!
- *And forget about resorting to the all-nighters. "The body won't let you," says Sheppard. "You would pay, pay, pay through the nose" ("Older, Wiser and Hitting the Books", Times Colonist, August 21, 2003: D2)*

Belonging: acceptance, recognition and identity

There are approximately 2,600 students who are 35 and older on campus. The issues that these students face include ... a serious sense of isolation, loss of identity and income; juggling studies with home-life concerns from child-rearing to elderly parents; forgoing get-togethers with friends for a heavy academic workload; and feeling tentative amid a confident youthful majority ("Older, Wiser and Hitting the Books", Times Colonist, August 21, 2003: D1)

The participants in this project did not speak with one voice when it came to the issue of finding a sense of belonging in the classroom or on campus. Some students felt that their classmates were very supportive of their child-related challenges, while others believed that their classmates lost interest upon hearing that there were children. Older students with children often felt that they had more in common with the professors, especially if in a class that was dominated by young students.

Graduate students are quite mature. They give respect to the families. People ask me how my wife and children are (Dola).

Most felt that the undergraduate students did not understand the challenges of being a student with children which meant that students with children in those classes were more likely to feel awkward or wrong about being back in school. One member of Counselling Services at UVic made the observation that older students tend to be more self-conscious while younger students tend to be oblivious to age and status differences.

A number of students commented on how challenging it was to enter the classroom as a student, leaving the worries and responsibilities of family life aside for the duration of a lecture or exam. This was more pronounced when students had to juggle childcare arrangements and transportation and it was most critical when a child was ill and unable to attend childcare or school. More than one parent acknowledged how miserable it felt to send a sick child to school because there was no one to help while they attended class.

On the positive end, for those students who had previously attended university, there was a strong sense that returning to school, as a parent, created a greater sense of personal responsibility and accountability. For students with older children, returning to school can be a source of pride for both the student and their family:

they tell all their friends, "y'know, my mum's at the University" ... and the funny thing is when I first started, I tried to keep it quiet. ... I was a bit embarrassed, but now I'm not (Annie).

... while younger children can provide a welcome distraction after too many hours in the library or computer lab.

When you have been working all day and your mind goes dull, and you go back and see your daughter and play, it refreshes your mind, you get your memory back (Dola).

Benefits: What can the University Learn from Students with Children?

Most respondents discussed the extent to which families and students with children can bring diversity and great personal and professional experience to the campus. Students with

children might also have broader perspectives, organisational and leadership skills, maturity and commitment.

Students with children contribute to the University financially, through day care, family housing, summer camps, and family recreation memberships (UVic staff).

It brings a richness having the children around (UVic staff).

For some students with children, the very question of what might they contribute to university life seemed unreasonable or overwhelming, due to the complex and multiple strains that they experience; however, even for these students, it is clear that they are giving more than they are taking in their relationship with the University.

Love

Representatives of the Aboriginal and faith communities suggest that many students with children teach and model love in their personal lives and in the classroom through their struggles to achieve better opportunities for their children, their commitment to their families, their desire to balance the needs of their family with their need to do well in school and in the world – in all these ways, students with children demonstrate love. When asked how families contribute to the University community, Bill Mc Ghee responded:

It's not tangible at all; it's not about what they will do for the University ... I think families, healthy families, teach us how to be in the world. And there are lots of healthy families, though we've all got our issues, our difficulties in life. Good families teach us love. ... Somehow people get lost in the idea of a career. People choose a career because they want to do something they love to support families. That's about love. You can't teach that. It's more than money and jobs; it's about caring for each other. The University in some ways wants to be financially viable, but at the end of the day, if you don't have people who cared for one another, it wouldn't stay around (Bill Mc Ghee, Aboriginal Counsellor).

Impacts on the children

We were not able to find a great deal of research that discusses the impact on children of having parents in University. Within this project, students, faculty and staff suggested a range of possible consequences, both positive and negative, for the children of students at UVic. Roger John, UVic's Aboriginal Student Advisor, believes that one of the benefits of children seeing the parents in the role of students emerges through recruitment – children are far more likely to enter post-secondary education after experiencing the University environment and having a familiarity and awareness of school life. Lori Nolt, director of Student Awards and Financial Aid, believes that her decision to attend university was made when she was a young child, after accompanying her mother to university, possibly because her mother could not find another childcare option.

On the other hand, one of UVic's counsellors spoke about UVic being a negative experience for children. Further research would be helpful to gain a picture of children's experiences of living at UVic or witnessing their parents in the student role. Some believe that children do not have access to child-friendly spaces on UVic's campus.

If we are able to create positive spaces and experiences for children, we have made a really strong impact that can have a powerful and lasting affect. (UVic staff).

Most activities tend to be designed for the ‘traditional’ 18-25 year-old single students, not students and their families. Children should be exposed to more than just the photocopying machine or the office-where-papers-get-submitted at 4:30 p.m. on a Friday. School should be about more than mum or dad being too exhausted or too busy to play.

v. Culture and Diversity

Objective 4: to provide a learning environment that builds the sense of community possible at a university where the majority of the students come from outside the local region (UVic’s Strategic Plan, 2002: 13).

Students with children contribute to the University community by showing us ... that working as an academic is only one part of life. ... We compartmentalize so much. At times you have to do that (during exams, for example) ... but that’s only one part of who we are. It’s not very healthy to identify with only one piece (UVic staff).

We tend not to think about the University as representing a culture, but for non-traditional students – i.e. those who are not single and between the ages of 18-25 – becoming a student can cause significant culture shock. Many of the attitudes and resources of the University are geared towards younger students and do not take into account the needs or realities of mature students or those with children. In fact, many of the attitudes, as currently shaped, fail to support the emotional and cultural needs of older students.

One staff member of Student and Ancillary Services expressed the belief that student services should exist to help students to be:

independent, autonomous, self-reliant, self-regulating, and capable, rather than helpless and dependent (UVic First Nations staff).

This notion that any of us can (or should) be autonomous is quite specific to Western liberal values, even though these values are rarely reflected in our lived experiences. Most of us recognise that we are supported and enriched, not rendered helpless or dependent, by our relationships with each other, through family, friendships and community. Roger John and Bill Mc Ghee, who work within the First Nations community on campus, spoke in their interviews about the interconnectedness of all people and acknowledged that their personal and professional roles are blurred.

Walking around downtown, outside this place, attending gatherings, it’s all part of the same thing. We don’t separate jobs from personal life. ... The students always make a point of introducing their families to us, that’s very important to them, that we know their families (UVic First Nations staff).

Spiritual leaders also reported connecting with students as a part of a family.

My professional role is somewhat broad and so when I meet students and/or their family members in the supermarket or other places, they usually want to chat and they tell me how their family has been doing since we were last in touch (UVic staff).

Diversity: Who benefits? Who pays?

The more diverse our student population is, whether in age, family situation or ethnic background, the more representative of the larger community it is, and the more interesting and intellectually stimulating it will be for all of us (UVic staff).

Diversity can be experienced in very different ways – depending if one is the ‘beneficiary’ of diversity or if one is the ‘representative’ of diversity. Although mainstream professors and students might feel good about themselves for living and working in an atmosphere of diversity; many students with children, particularly international students, spoke of struggling with isolation, language barriers, difficulties with making friends, and a sense of discrimination.

When I was in Thailand and India, you find more multiculturalism; you were never bored. They would have food fairs and you feel it is a multicultural campus. Here, I don't really feel that. They should have some activities. In India, people have extended families and communities. Here, in Canada, I feel the culture is more self-centred. Since we have come here we could not adapt. We cannot make many Canadian friends. But to bring them together, you need cultural programs. This is lacking (Dola).

Some of the international students stated that they were not having the experience that they had imagined, in terms of diversity and acceptance. They know that they are treated differently, not always purposefully, perhaps, but with discrimination as the result. These experiences of discrimination can deepen the sense of isolation and loneliness that are quite common for students who have moved here from another city or country.

Coming from another country, the hardest thing is not having the family support. I know my mother would love to help with the kids, but she is too far away (Beatrice).

Overall, students reported feeling safe and supported in practicing their own religions.

Nice to have religious issues very balanced. It's nice to have this respect. Also, there are rooms you can rent for religious gatherings. More than enough respect for every religion (Layla).

One of the University's chaplains also reported that she has a great deal of contact with students who have children. Families seek out a chaplain in order to develop community contacts and support, as well as for counselling, weddings and funerals.

Families contact us hoping to build social connections, and develop networks to support their children's care and education (UVic staff).

Aboriginal perspectives

Objective 3: to increase the number of aboriginal students graduating from all Faculties at UVic, building on our commitment to and our unique relationship with First Nations communities (UVic's Strategic Plan, 2002: 13).

Just as families may find that the University lacks child and adolescent friendly spaces, some Aboriginal students find that the western environment of the University is uncomfortable and discriminatory. For example, when Aboriginal Counselling Services were situated in the Student Counselling building, which involved the requirement of speaking to a secretary before seeing a counsellor, it was accessed by a low number of Aboriginal students. Once Aboriginal

Counselling Services moved to a quiet building, near the Equity Office, where one door led directly to a counsellor, more students visited. At UVic, Aboriginal students might experience a sense of exclusion on two levels: as students with children and as a culture that is outside of the mainstream.

Bill Mc Ghee and Roger John noted that family members of students are welcome to access the Aboriginal counselling services. This is not the case for the mainstream counselling services that are offered through the University. For Bill Mc Ghee and Roger John there was no question that students need to be seen in the context of their family and the community.

In an Aboriginal community, if you don't know the healer there is something wrong. Nobody will go and see them. I don't make the professional distance necessary, if I did that I would be causing harm to the community (Bill Mc Ghee, Aboriginal Counsellor).

For Aboriginal people, the community is the family. Aboriginal students want to honour their commitments to school and to community events, such as naming ceremonies, potlatches, funerals and weddings. It can be difficult to achieve this balance, especially if students have their own children and all of the responsibilities that go with parenting.

Community of origin wants you back. You feel pulled, because you haven't made the right choice. Some families judge you and your family; that you are trying to be better than the rest of us (Bill Mc Ghee, Aboriginal Counsellor).

Along with the challenge of reconciling school commitments with family responsibilities, there is also the pervasive barrier of racism that is experienced by Aboriginal students.

There may be a lot of pride put into setting up these equity groups, these ... anti-discrimination panels, but even their way of being ... their actual process, the way they function themselves, is somehow exclusive (Bill Mc Ghee, Aboriginal Counsellor).

vi. Some things are too hard to talk about ...

Throughout the interviews and in the think tank, “Baby Steps”, there were some themes that felt submerged just below the surface of so many tired eyes and overwhelmed voices. For the students, these stories were almost unspeakable, because to reveal them might threaten the fragile structure that they have constructed to convince themselves that they are coping, that they are OK. These issues are not, as one might imagine, dark confessions of violence or abuse; rather, they are smaller, more poignant – the anxieties that keep students awake at 2 a.m., even if all their babies are sleeping.

The impact on children of having parents who are students was mentioned briefly by many participants, but was rarely elaborated upon. The interviewer had the sense that while many felt guilty, they could not see a way out due to a lack of choices and supports.

The hardest thing:

... is missing out on watching [my] kids play outside, on the weekends. Not doing so many things as a family. Feeling that work never ends. Never be able to do it. Hard

to set boundaries about stopping [school work]. The work never really ends ...if you have a job, the work ends” (Beatrice).

... in my children’s entire lives, I have never had a ‘free’ weekend not to worry about school (Anna).

... I told Josh (3 years old): I’m busy, I have work to do and then if I asked him to do something, he would say: “ No, I’m busy mum, I have work to do”. I felt really bad about that (Beatrice).

... My wife and I decided that being in a new country, where we don’t have many friends, that to every new situation we will adjust. In the beginning, we spoke to many people about our problems, but now we will just adjust (Dola).

... there’s a huge amount of guilt (“Older, Wiser and Hitting the Books”, Times Colonist, August 21, 2003: D2).

... You don’t have (many) problems without a family at University, sometimes you feel lonely, but you don’t see the problems. ... [With a family] you feel guilty for your child without friends (Dola).

...spouses, even if they are not oppositional, they sort of give the feeling that they’d like things to be the way they are and not to change ... we were in anxiety all the time, it wasn’t a good sort of life we were living. The possibility of something changing and making it worse was sort of a bigger fear... (Annie).

... sometimes you see one partner moving ahead personally, the other partner gets freaked out ... I’ve seen it cost some relationships (UVic Staff).

... Myself, I want very good marks. I have a very strong sense of wanting to contribute to the community, this I have to give up. I feel guilty for not contributing along with the others in class. Work finishes, but you are expected to study all the time (Jay).

I kept thinking my problem was self-identity but funnily enough in the last course, somebody said something that made me realise that it was my stress from being in the educational setting. Carrying it from your childhood experiences from school (Annie).

Martha McAlister, in her work as the director of the Family Centre, has witnessed the importance of building community and connectedness as a way for students with children to cope with chronic illness, spousal abuse, poverty, isolation, discrimination and financial difficulties:

I was horrified and saddened when a parent confided in me: “If I didn’t have the Family Centre I might have killed my child” (Martha McAlister).

These challenges are often general and systemic, requiring the support of the University’s administration to solve them; however, many offices and individuals have already made wonderful contributions to the lives of students and their children.

Who cares? People, Programs and Lollypops

One of the rewarding aspects of doing this research was that of noticing aspects of our campus that are already supporting students by providing a family-friendly atmosphere, such as:

- the Book Store’s family-friendly corner and their great selection of children’s books;

- Campus Security's Halloween parties, bike rodeos and Christmas hamper programs;
- Health Services' provision of excellent care for students and their children and partners is wonderful, especially those who have relocated to Victoria for university;
- Lori Nolt, the wonderful director of Student Awards and Financial Aid, brings information and application forms to the Family Centre to increase accessibility;
- UVic's superb childcare services (we just need more spaces!);
- on-campus Family Housing;
- the Family Centre;
- the Grad Centre's family video night;
- the Student Union Building's Cinecenta's regular children's matinees;
- Naz, the lollypop-providing pharmacist who works in the Student Union Building;
- Finnerty Express coffee shop;
- UVic's 100th anniversary kid-friendly celebrations offered lots of wonderful events, activities and fun; and
- *many* of the faculty and staff who work at UVic.

Now What? – How do we support students with children?

We encourage you to reflect on this report as a first step towards responding to the challenges and needs that have been described by the students, staff and faculty who participated in this project. This is not simply a call for more funding for students with children, or the agencies that are meant to serve them. Money is important, but only if accompanied by the deeper, more systemic, changes that are required to transform the experience of students with children.

We need an attitude shift that would underlie everything. The University should ask, “What can we do?” – rather than succumbing to the attitude that so often prevails, the attitude that says, “We can’t deal with that, it’s outside of our realm” (Martha McAlister).

Barbara Whittington, a professor in the School of Social Work and the coordinator for the Family Centre, centralized the following questions throughout our research project:

How do we create safe, supportive, healthy families and recognise people as being a strength for the community? How do we help people to reach their greatest potential, not highest grade point average? We need a broader understanding of a rich community, diversity ... and different family structures (Barbara Whittington).

This final section will review the suggestions that were offered by students, faculty and staff for ways in which UVic could support students with children while improving the quality of life for all who work and learn at the University. It is important to note that although we speak of systemic changes it does not mean that all of the ideas that are necessarily grand. Changes can and should occur through small and large actions and policies. A tick-box on a form can be as important as more money for bursaries towards the overall goal of supporting students with children at UVic.

1. The University should identify new students with children.

The need to identify students with children emerged as a priority in many conversations and interviews. It is exceedingly difficult to analyse the needs of a group if no data are available to describe them. Many students and administrators suggested that a tick-box, to allow students to indicate if they have children, could be included on all registration and re-registration forms in order to help UVic to identify this emerging equity group.

Recognise the students with children in both the application and the acceptance process [to university]. [We] need to give students with children a chance to identity [themselves] in the forms; there needs to be some kind of tracking (UVic Staff).

2. Information should be available before students with children arrive at UVic and in an ongoing way.

Students, especially those who have relocated in order to attend UVic, consistently described the need for more timely information on major issues, such as housing, childcare,

financial aid, family counselling and program requirements as well as on some of the less pressing issues, such as recreation options, playgrounds, good public schools and babysitting.

Let other students with families know what works. ... Counselling centre was really good, integral. Some professors were really helpful and compassionate ... There is a need to brainstorm ideas about how to manage to get through. Often plans were set up, with back-up plans when there were school commitments, but then there would be a child "meltdown", and this would be very frustrating, as all plans were now useless (Kira).

3. The University should help students to connect to pre-existing networks. There is no need (or time!) to reinvent useful tools.

All students take some time to get oriented to a new environment and the potentially new experience of being at University; however, students with children have to do this many times over – for themselves and for the children and, possibly, even for their partners. A website is not enough! The Family Centre needs to be available to more people more of the time. Students who live off-campus are particularly isolated and vulnerable. They need to be given information that will enable them to cope with the challenges of being both parents and students.

Students Services' need to be adequately resourced and recognized for the work they already do and could do to support, retain and ensure that our students are successful during their university experience and as they make the transition from school to work (UVic staff).

Provide a broader mandate for the Family Centre to work with Student Services in providing counselling, recreation, financial aid and health services to the families of students (UVic staff)

4. Increased funding and facilities for childcare are essential.

This theme was explored in depth in many parts of this paper but it cannot be emphasised enough. If students with children are to be given an opportunity to reach their academic potential, affordable, flexible options for quality child care services must exist that will meet the needs of all who require them. Flexible might mean that students could have access to childcare part-time or in the evenings and weekends or when in a time of greater stress, such as exams or the end-of-term crunch.

5. The University should create bursary and loan policies that provide greater support for students with children.

Students with children need to have access to clear and consistent information about bursaries and loans and they need access to grants that will help them to avoid an exorbitant debt-load. Seminars could be held to help new students to learn more about how to apply for funding. Others suggested that student advisors in various faculties also need training so that they can direct students towards sources of funding.

There is a need for increasing availability of bursaries and greater flexibility... recognising that every family has a different situation. I have found that if you don't fit into the category, then nothing is available (Beatrice).

Include more scholarships not based on GPA (UVic staff).

6. There should be clear information about wait-lists, for on-campus family housing and UVic child care services. This would help people to be better prepared financially and mentally.

This point was raised most frequently by students who had relocated in order to attend UVic; suggesting that the challenges of adjusting to a new city or country were complicated by a lack of clear information.

A special package should be sent out, with a checklist of things to prepare for. For people from another society it is a big difference. Tendency to tell people to go to a website: it is a sea, hard to find the one island that you want (Jay).

Keep students updated on their position on the family housing website. So you can make a more informed decision. I wouldn't have been so optimistic... I would have applied earlier (Jay).

7. Create a family-friendly campus

Just as students are affected by services and resources, such as finances, housing and access to daycare, so, too, are their children. If children feel welcomed and at-home, parents are relieved of a significant stressor and are able to concentrate more on their academics. As well, as was stated by Roger John, UVic's Aboriginal Student Advisor, First Nations children are far more likely to enter post-secondary education after experiencing the University environment and having a familiarity and awareness of University life.

Some suggestions for making the campus a more family-friendly place include:

- play-spaces for children and youths;
- playgrounds in the middle of campus;
- bike trails suitable for kids;
- a library for young kids;
- more small spaces, not huge informal buildings;
- spaces for breastfeeding on campus or support it in class;
- better integration of all student services in one place, including a Family Centre;
- space for kids to play on the lawn in front of the library;
- full-time Family Centre expanded to serve faculty, staff and students who live off-campus;
- a kids room at the faculty club and/or the grad club;
- student facilities accessible to families (i.e. recreation centre, pool); and
- more family- friendly events year-round, such as barbeques, holidays, and dances.

8. UVic should take a leadership role in providing innovative support to students with children. Some of the ideas that we heard included:

- strengthen pre-existing resources, such as the Family Centre;
- ensure that the voices of students with children are integrated into UVic's planning processes, such as the Housing Plan and the Campus Plan;
- increase flexibility in academics;
- educate all students about the realities of students with children;

- provide a central, visible office in the Student Union Building with someone who can support students with children;
- drop-in babysitting service during class times;
- more classes available on weekends or in the evening;
- more scholarships available to part-time students;
- volunteer respite-care for single parents;
- family counsellor available through counselling services;
- more volunteer opportunities to work with children;
- increasing flexible, available and affordable day-care services;
- improving accessibility of student housing;
- support faculty in developing their awareness of the issues that affect students with children;
- create more links between international students with children; and
- promote a broader definition of family.

The University of Victoria, in its strategic plan, *A Vision for the Future*, and through its existing services, such as the Family Centre, has demonstrated its desire to create an equitable learning environment for all students, including those students who have children. This report is meant to serve as both a review of what already exists and as a catalyst for greater innovation and deeper support, at all levels, for students with children.

People are what make our university: students, faculty, staff and alumni. Our principal focus in the years ahead must be on these people. Our goal is to recruit and retain a diverse group of exceptionally talented students, faculty and staff and to support them in ways that allow them to reach their highest potential. Our commitment to diversity, equity, quality and a supportive environment will be paramount (UVic's Strategic Plan, 2002: 12).

References

- Alphonso, C. (2003). Students find it tough to put food on the table. In the *Globe and Mail*. December 2, 2003: A3.
- Dedyna, K. (2003) Older, Wiser and Hitting the Books. In the *Times Colonist*, August 21, 2003, D 1-2: Victoria.
- Ricks, F., Kadlec, H., Corner, S. & Paul, R. (2003). Research on Critical Aspects of Graduate Education at the University of Victoria. Presented to the University of Victoria.
- Siverston, C. (2003). Survey of barriers to completion. Institutional Planning and Analysis. Presented to the University of Victoria.
- University of Victoria (2002). A Vision for the future: A strategic plan for the University of Victoria.
- Whittington, B. (2004) Campus Families in Bella, L. (ed) Making Families, Fernwood Publishing, Halifax (in press)
- www.mcaws.gov.bc.ca/childcare/index.htm

Appendix I

Interview questions for students with children

Personal Outline

1. Nationality
2. Area of study
3. Number and ages of children
4. History of studies/ work
5. Year of arrival at UVIC
6. Are you a sole parent or do you have a partner?
 - a. Partner's nationality
 - b. Partner's work and/or studies
7. What have been the issues you have confronted as a student family?
8. What were the unexpected things that came up? This can include personal, or family matters.
9. What are the barriers you have experienced?
10. Have you studied at University without a family? Can you take yourself back to being a student without a family and tell me what the differences are?
11. In your classes, with professors and other students, to what extent can you be your whole self (including your family)?
12. In what ways is the University particularly helpful towards Students with Families?
13. Do you have suggestions about what would make UVIC a more family friendly place?
14. What (if any) are your community supports?
15. What do you as a student with a family feel you bring to UVIC?
16. When have you felt it was an advantage to be a student with a family?

Passing on the Student Family wisdom

17. In terms of advice for new student families, what do you know now that you would have like to have known when you began this process?
18. What have been some strategies you have used, for example during exam period?
19. How do you explain studying, deadlines and exams to your kids?
20. Are there places that are good for student families, like restaurants, community services, people or places, which are useful to include in a list for new student families?

Two Last Questions:

21. What's been the hardest thing?
22. Can you think of who else might like to talk about their experiences as a student family?

Appendix II

Interview questions for UVIC staff and faculty

Project Outline: This research project is being directed by Barbara Whittington and Linda Sproule-Jones. The study is seeking to identify barriers and difficulties experienced by students, but also to understand how students with children make a valued contribution to the University community. A key aspect of this research includes the experiences of University staff that may or may not come into contact with student families.

1. Could you tell me about your role within the University?
2. In what ways do you come into contact with student families? Or would you even know that the person you were speaking to had a family?
3. Are there ways outside your professional role that you come into contact with student families?
4. What kinds of issues do you feel student families are faced with?
5. Do you have any ideas about how these issues might be addressed?
6. What do you see as the three most crucial issues facing student families?
7. In your view, how do student families contribute to the University community?
8. Can you take a moment to imagine the kinds of changes and environment, which may be outside of your own department, but which would make UVIC a really family friendly university and a great place to raise a family while pursuing a degree?
9. Is there anyone else you would recommend I speak to in respect to this project?
10. Do you have any Family Centre Brochures?

Appendix III

Fees for Child Care Services in Victoria

1. Fees for *UVic Child Care Services* (as of November, 2003):

- **Infant Care** - Children 6-18 months of age **\$891/month**
- **Toddler Care** - Children 19-36 months of age **\$765/month**
- **Early Childhood Care** - Children 37 months - 5 years of age **\$582/month**
- **School Age Care** - Children 6 - 12 years of age **\$221/month**

Parents who apply for and receive a subsidy would pay the difference between what subsidy covered and the fee charged. Information on the subsidy program can be found at the government website: www.mcaws.gov.bc.ca/childcare/index.htm

I believe our fees for Child Care are competitive. We offer a quality program with well-trained and educated Child Care Staff. If parents are wait listed I refer them to the Child Day Care Information Service, which provided parents with a listing of various care providers in Victoria (UVic staff).

2. *Average Monthly Fees for Child Care in the city of Victoria* (as of February 2002)

Family Day Care (all day, five days/week)

Infant	\$552/month
Toddler	\$524/month
3-5 years old	\$509/month
Kindergarten	\$454/month (i.e. during school holidays)
School Age	\$245/month (i.e. during school holidays)

Group Day Care (all day, five days/week)

Infant	\$728/month
Toddler	\$614/month
3-5 years old	\$493/month
Kindergarten	\$450/month

Pre-school

2 mornings/week	\$78/month
3 mornings/week	\$107/month

Out of school care

Kindergarten	\$358/month
6-12 years old	\$221/month

Appendix IV

Child Care Subsidy Rate Table

Licensed Child Care Facilities

		Four hours or less daily unless both before and after school care provided		More than four hours daily or both before and after school care provided	
		Per Day	Per Month	Per Day	Per Month
Family	F1 (0-18 mos)	\$10.95	\$219.00	\$21.90	\$438.00
	F2 (19-36 mos)	10.10	202.00	20.20	404.00
	F3 (37mos-5yrs)	8.85	177.00	17.70	354.00
Group	G1 (0-18 mos)	14.63	292.50	29.25	585.00
	G2 (19-36 mos)	13.20	264.00	26.40	528.00
	G3 (37mos+)	9.20	184.00	18.40	368.00
Out-of-school*	L1 (kindergarten)	10.20	204.00	12.75	255.00
	L2 (grade 1 and up)	7.38	147.56	8.65	173.00
Pre-school**	N I (up to 4 hours/day)	5.35	107.00		

*F3 or G3 rates apply when full days of care are given due to school closure or illness, or for irregular days of care totally outside school hours.

**Licensed preschool is a half-day program only.

This table was found at this website: www.mcaws.gov.bc.ca/childcare/index.htm

Appendix V

On-Campus Family Housing

On-campus Family Housing is reasonably affordable, especially compared to housing costs off-campus in Victoria. However, compared to the housing that a student might have been paying in a smaller community, it can be a significant expense, often costing close to half of a student loan. As well, students report waiting for a year, or more to get into on-campus Family Housing.

The waitlist ... means that many people who need it right away when they first arrive, are getting in there much later and towards the end of their studies (Martha McAlister, Director of Family Centre).

On-campus Family Housing

1-bedroom apartment	\$570/month
2-bedroom apartment	\$670/month
2-bedroom townhouse	\$725/month
3-bedroom townhouse	\$790/month

Appendix VI

Students find it tough to put food on the table

Demand has jumped this academic year, say food banks on university campuses

By CAROLINE ALPHONSO

EDUCATION REPORTER

Wednesday, December 3, 2003 - Page A3 (*The Globe and Mail*)

After paying her tuition fees, school supply expenses, daycare costs, rent and her ever-climbing utility bills, Leah Chinn can barely afford to feed herself, let alone her four-year-old son.

Her student loan and part-time job are supposed to cover these costs. "It's not enough," the 28-year-old single parent says.

So at least once every two weeks and like so many of her peers, Ms. Chinn makes the trek down to the student-union building on her university campus to stock up her kitchen cupboards. There's pasta, canned beans and at times even fresh produce waiting in the fridge.

Food banks such as the one Ms. Chinn uses at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax have cropped up on campuses across the country. Student unions running them are reporting increased use this year as students stretch their dollars to meet rising tuition fees and living expenses.

The average cost of tuition across the country this year for a four-year undergraduate degree is \$17,000, according to the Canadian Federation of Students. This does not include living expenses or textbooks.

"Tuition fees are going up, and they're at the point where it's pretty much impossible to get through a degree without incredible debt loads," said Sacha Kopelow of NSCAD's student union.

Ms. Kopelow takes delivery of non-perishable items every two weeks from the local food bank. On top of that, the student union subsidizes some of the food, providing needy students with fresh produce. It's difficult to keep the shelves stocked, with roughly 15 students coming in a day, Ms. Kopelow said.

The picture is similar on campuses across Canada, raising concerns as to whether the service is being abused by some.

The student union at Queen's University in Kingston, Ont., is seeing 70 people walk in every week, compared with 30 at this time last year. At the University of Alberta in Edmonton, the number of student clients has gone up to 1,700 from 250 when the food bank first opened a decade ago. And at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, the campus-based food bank has seen a 20-per-cent jump in the number of students walking through its doors.

"Some weeks it's hard to keep up," said Tom Suffield, assistant director of enrolment services and co-ordinator of the food bank. "Certainly, in the past there have been times when the cupboard has been bare."

Student unions depend on donations from university staff, students and the local food bank. But some go as far as subsidizing the food themselves -- a move that may put the student-run food bank at Queen's in the red by the end of the year.

The university's student union allocates a certain percentage of its budget to the food bank. But services director Adam Perry said costs are rising as he continuously restocks the shelves.

He acknowledges that Queen's has a fairly affluent student population. "But then there's students who get here on their marks, and don't have enough money. The food bank is not only for people who can't afford to eat, but for those who need to supplement their current incomes."

With such a drastic increase in student users of campus-based food banks, people such as Mr. Perry wonder whether there is some abuse of the service. Student unions know neither the financial background nor the names of those who receive food.

But Adrienne Kennedy, vice-president of campus issues at the University of Western Ontario's student union in London, Ont., thinks it's likely that only a small percentage of students abuse the service.

"I do worry about that. Even if it's one or two students that do it, I worry because the food would help others," Ms. Kennedy said. "But as long as we're reaching students that do need it, I'm happy."

Charles Seiden, executive director of the Canadian Association of Food Banks, which represents food banks in every province, also believes that few students, if any, take improper advantage of the service.

"My guess is that for students who actually have to go and get a few meals from a food bank, they have to be pretty desperate."

