

President: David J. Skorton
Office of the President
300 Day Hall
Cornell University
Ithaca, NY 14853

October 8, 2009

Dear President Skorton:

REDUCTION IN CHILD CARE GRANT 09/10 FOR STUDENTS WITH CHILDREN

As students with children who are proud to be members of the Cornell community, who work hard to fulfill our dual commitments to the university and to our families, and who endeavor always to achieve academic excellence, we are writing to express concern over the proposed changes to the student Child Care Grant in the 2009-10 academic year. We acknowledge that the current economic climate has forced the university to make many difficult decisions in terms of financing and budgets, and appreciate that the proposed changes to the Child Care Grant (effectively reduced to a one-time payment of \$1,500 per child) have been made in good faith. We understand that the fund for students is different to that for faculty and staff, that \$1,500 is all that we had been allocated through the Graduate School in the past, and that the Endowment had previously been used to top up our Grants. Yet, even with the university's need to cut costs, we contend that a fully functioning Child Care Grant provides vital support for the small population of the Cornell community who are both students and parents.

Institutional Support for Inclusivity

Our pride in Cornell has been fostered in part by the university's commitment to creating an inclusive and diverse community. Many of us submitted applications and accepted offers because the university is "a welcoming and inclusive place to work and study," as we see articulated in the "President's Statement on Affirmative Action and Diversity in Employment" of August 2008. We have all been encouraged by the university's reputation as a family-friendly institution, and are not surprised that for the past four years (2006-2009 inclusive) it has been voted as one of the 100 best companies for working mothers.

Cornell shows characteristic foresight when, recognizing that students and employees with children contribute significantly to the university community, it develops policies that enable parents to meet and exceed their responsibilities at work and at home. In the second institutional review of the Cornell Child Care Grant Subsidy Program (CCCGSP) in July 2009, Karen Shellenback notes that "the CCCGSP helps to recruit and especially retain employees" (2), that "maintaining stable, reliable and high quality child care arrangements positively impact employee concentration, engagement and productivity at work" (2), and that "the university, as a whole, [is] positively impacted by this grant" (9). While the 2009 review surveyed only faculty and staff who used the CCCGSP, students with children were also at that time entitled to the same amount of financial support and were, surely, as positively affected by the CCCGSP. (For the full report, please see <http://government.cce.cornell.edu/doc/pdf/171.pdf>).

Concerns

The proposed changes to the student Child Care Grant limit the opportunity for students with children to fully participate in the Cornell community because, by the logic of the 2009 report on the CCCGSP, funding is required for low-income parents to reach their full potential at work. We also have a number of specific concerns relating to the way in which the cuts were administered:

1. **Extent of Reduction:** The effective cut is so significant that many students with children are no longer able to maintain their previous childcare arrangements beyond a few months; others have had to take out last-minute loans; and others are struggling even to put food on the table. Most students subsist on a small stipend; those with children have many more costs towards basic standards of living, particularly in terms of childcare.
2. **Disparity between Funds and Cost of Childcare:** Childcare is not cheap, particularly in Ithaca; the proposed allowance of \$125 per month covers only approximately 10% of childcare costs in a month (depending on the provider).
3. **Short Notice:** The changes to the Child Care Grant were intimated only in the summer of 2009, and the precise details were not made available until September 1, 2009. With more notice, students hit by this effective cut in grant monies would at least have been able to budget differently, take on extra paid work during the summer, move children to cheaper daycare providers, or take out loans.
4. **New Timeline:** With the new structure to the Child Care Grant, students will receive their first and only payment in December 2009 or January 2010, rather than at the beginning of each semester from September on. This means that many students with children are now struggling to pay childcare bills between September (when the changes were announced and students had expected to receive their first payment) and December/January (when the lump sum will now be paid).
5. **Choice of University:** Many students with children took the Child Care Grant into account when applying to, or accepting an offer from, Cornell, and many chose Cornell over other equally reputable universities. These students are disappointed not to have had prior indication that the grant might be altered.
6. **Raise for Faculty and Staff:** We do appreciate that our grants are funded by a separate pool of money from those for the faculty and staff, and that this is why our grants were drastically cut while faculty and staff in the lowest income bracket are now eligible for 50% of their childcare costs to be covered, up to \$5,000. That the faculty and staff have had their funds increased (perhaps as a result of Shellenback's research), however, is particularly difficult for students with children to hear when their funds have been reduced so significantly, and when Cornell aims to promote a diverse and inclusive community.
7. **Administrative Transparency:** Greater transparency, in two ways, would entail greater trust between students and the administration: first, adequate notice of any possible changes to funding would help students manage their finances; and second, a clear explanation of where funds come from would help students anticipate and make sense of any changes. In this instance, students found out in September that their Child Care Grant was not actually an extension of the faculty and staff CCCGSP (as it was commonly described, including in Shellenback's report) but that it was funding provided by the Faculty of Graduate Students.

Effects

We have coordinated this letter because the effects of these cuts on many students with children are so severe that we felt the administration needed to realize how much the Child Care Grants were needed. These negative effects include increased financial anxiety, decreased quality of work and/or family time, slower academic progress, reduced time to devote to teaching responsibilities, and greater concern that Cornell's support for students with children might change without notice. According to the Office of the Dean of Students, "Cornell recognizes the high cost of quality child care can be a substantial burden to students that are raising children" (see <http://studentparents.dos.cornell.edu/Financial.html>). This burden, being both financial and emotional, can have adverse effects on students' academic work and personal wellbeing if not adequately addressed.

Students who had budgeted for similar funding as was available last year now have to suddenly find funds from alternative sources. This, of course, is not easy to do. Some students expect to take their children out of full-time childcare to reduce costs: as one graduate student in this situation explains, such a solution will "affect the time we will be able to spend on our dissertations," thus slowing down progress. Reduced childcare will also entail greater stress at home and reduced time to support undergraduate students through teaching, grading, or supervising. Other students expect to no longer be able to fulfill their teaching commitments at Cornell: one student, who is a single parent, expects to "lose [her] child's day care spot as of December when [her] own budgeted funds will run out;" as such, she can no longer guarantee that she will be available to teach in January, as arranged, because she might not have care for her child. Still other students can take out loans, but only if they are US citizens rather than international students; moreover, additional loans entail greater financial anxiety for those involved.

Conclusion

The short-term effects of the sudden and effective reduction in the Child Care Grant for students with children has had damaging financial effects on many Cornell students and families. Last year, according to Cresten Mansfeldt of the GPSA, 100 grants were allocated to students with children, with a combined budget of \$260,000. Certainly money will be saved this year by limiting funds to only \$1,500 per family, but are these relatively small savings worth the huge financial anxiety, diminished academic productivity, and reduced participation of the small Cornellian population of students with children? In the long-term, students with children may well choose to accept offers from other top schools, who can offer them greater financial incentives to help them support their families. As one new student to Cornell puts it, "if Cornell's reputation as a family-friendly university suffers, then quality applicants will decide to go elsewhere."

Committed as we all are to the Cornell community, we want the university to continue to be an outstanding academic institution. We hope the time we have spent compiling this letter makes our investment in our community clear. Those of us who are graduate students obviously bring a lot to the university in terms of intellectual capital, external grants or funding, and research; undergraduates with children, while a smaller population than graduate students who are parents, are also a significant investment for the university. We hope that Cornell's policies towards students with children continue to make it viable for all of us to excel in our fields and to have equal opportunities to those students without

children. To this end, we ask that the university reconsider the proposed changes to the student Child Care Grant, with the aim of finding the relatively small amount of funds required to better support students with children. Ideally, the amount proposed for students this year would be raised upon further reflection; ideally, the grant would return to its previous form. We request, at the least, that the policy is revisited in advance of the 2010-11 academic year, when the university might consider raising the amount of funds available for students with children. As the research into the CCCGSP would suggest, the Child Care Grant has a dramatic and wholly positive effect not just on the students and families who are eligible, but for the wider Cornell community, too.

Sincerely,

Supporters of Cornell Students with Children, 2009
(See over for list of signatories, collected electronically)