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2 States Step Up Colleges' Efforts to Reduce Unplanned Pregnancies

Photo courtesy of Anja Scheib

A baby shower held at Mississippi State U. this spring offered parents and expectant parents the chance to choose from an array of baby clothes and supplies. Supporting pregnant students is part of a new program required by Mississippi law.

By Meg Bernhard | AUGUST 05, 2015

PREMIUM

When state lawmakers in Mississippi wanted to reduce the state's teen-pregnancy rate, one of the highest in the nation, they looked to college campuses as key places to intervene. In 2014 the state's Legislature passed a law — the first of its kind in the United States — directing each community college and public university to become a "critical venue" to prevent unplanned pregnancies. Just a few months ago, Arkansas passed a similar law.

The two states are now leading an effort to educate college students about the consequences an unplanned pregnancy could have for their chances of success. The subject seems unrelated to academe but has the potential to affect every aspect of students' academic lives.

"Obviously there is more to college than just the books," says Angela Lasiter, a program specialist at the Arkansas Department of Higher Education who helps coordinate the state's efforts to reduce unplanned pregnancies.

College leaders say the project could help raise college-completion rates. For men and women alike, "it's difficult for them to continue on in school" if they have a child they didn't plan for, says Buddy Collins, vice president for student services at Itawamba Community College, in Fulton, Miss. Such students do not typically return, he says.

In responding to the law, which requires Mississippi's public colleges to develop a "plan of action," they have outlined how their campuses can integrate information about unplanned pregnancy into their academic and student-success courses and can collaborate with health-service providers across the state.

Mississippi's 15 community and junior colleges have each received funding to kick-start their efforts, and Hinds Community College, the state's largest, has begun using resources from the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy to develop a program.

Focused Approach

Though people enter college at different times in their lives, freshmen typically start at age 18 or 19. Seventy percent of teen pregnancies in Mississippi in 2012 were among women in that age group, according to data from the Mississippi Department of Health, suggesting that young college students could make up a significant portion of the state's unplanned-pregnancy cases.

Most colleges lack straightforward ways to track the number of students with children, let alone the number of unplanned pregnancies among students, says Joyce Yates, director of health education and wellness at Mississippi State University. That can make it difficult for colleges to provide services to students who are also parents — though many colleges offer some form of on-campus child care to alleviate some stresses that those students may face.

College officials say they have a general understanding of the number of pregnant students and students with children on their campuses, though only in broad terms. Anja Scheib, a junior at Mississippi State who is involved in campus pregnancy-support groups, says she held an event for student-parents on the campus, and 16 attended (15 women and one man). Still, she is not sure how many student-parents are enrolled.

The new legislation's main goal is to educate all students on Mississippi's public campuses before they or their partners become pregnant. Starting this academic year, colleges across the state will begin to integrate information about unplanned pregnancies and prevention into academic and student-success courses. Itawamba's required semester-long orientation course will now have a unit on preventing unintended pregnancy, and Kell Smith, director of communications and legislative services at the Mississippi Community College Board, says similar units may be added to academic courses in sociology, nursing, or biology.

The colleges will also collaborate with state health providers to offer information and materials for students, and will hold workshops and seminars on the topic. This is especially important for Mississippi's community colleges because only five out of 15 provide health services.

State leaders seem to be focusing their pregnancy-prevention agenda on community colleges, say Mississippi higher-education officials.

The state initially appropriated $250,000 to the 15 community colleges for the purpose of pregnancy prevention, though that total has since been reduced. Hinds Community College took the largest share, about $38,363, and Coahoma, in Clarksdale, took the smallest, around $7,055.

It's a good first step, says Mr. Collins, but certainly not enough. He anticipates that Itawamba will have to dip into its own resources in order to meet state requirements and provide the necessary programs and health services. And as vice president for student services and the college's Title IX coordinator, Mr. Collins will be pressed for time to oversee the college's pregnancy-prevention efforts.

"It is definitely a worthy project, but the financial burden does not need to be solely placed on the colleges themselves," he says.

Better Graduation Rates

One goal of the legislation in Mississippi and Arkansas is increased college completion, which is difficult for students to attain if they have substantive concerns in their lives outside of class, like children, says Mr. Smith of the Mississippi Community College Board

Title IX regulations are in place to ensure that women are not discriminated against if they have children, meaning that, for instance, they can make up classes that conflict with doctor's appointments. But on many campuses, critical services like child care are lacking. And to pay for the cost of a child, student-parents must often work more than one job, which takes away time from their studies.

Lara S. Kaufmann, senior counsel at the National Women's Law Center, applauds the states for focusing on the topic of unplanned pregnancy, but she says that comprehensive sex education should start at an earlier age, not right when students are most likely to become pregnant. Mississippi requires its public-school districts to teach sex education. Arkansas does not.

Ms. Kaufmann also warns that colleges will need to be strategic and careful in their messages so that students who already have children are not discouraged from continuing their studies. Encouraging messages are essential, she says.

"Pregnancy can be a risk factor for dropping out," Ms. Kaufmann says. "But it doesn't have to be."

This spring, Ms. Scheib and a group of other students threw a baby shower at Mississippi State for student-parents, to provide them with donated clothing and supplies they might need for their children. The expectant parents who came to the shower browsed through selections of diapers, baby clothes, and coupons for local recreation centers they could visit with their young children.

"They were blown away because they don't often feel welcome on campus," says Ms. Scheib. "They feel like everyone can see their 'failure' when they're walking around on campus pregnant, when really they need to be celebrated as a minority on campus because they are continuing their education."

Christy Laughlin argues that campuses should do more to support pregnant students and not focus solely on prevention. She is expecting a child next month, and graduated from Mississippi State in May. She says that the timing of her pregnancy — which was unplanned — was lucky, and that she might not have graduated if she'd had another semester or two of college left.

"It was so important for me to have that diploma," Ms. Laughlin says. "My pregnancy fell at just the right time to be able to graduate and waddle across the stage and pick it up."

Still, her pregnancy did not come without difficulties. Bouts of morning sickness often prevented her from attending an 8 a.m. class, and she had trouble negotiating with her professor about her absences, Ms. Laughlin says.

"You can try to prevent it all day long," she says, "but it's going to happen when it happens."