



## Success Story: Minnesota Department of Health Treasurer

### *Relationships + Resources = Retention of Young Student Mothers in Post-Secondary Education*

Since 1993, St. Catherine University in Minnesota has been operating the Access and Success program, an innovative retention program focused on supporting student parents. Program staff are licensed social workers who assist students in building professional relationships and connect students to internal and external resources to meet their needs and the needs of their families.

The program identified some unique challenges and risk factors for this population: limited emotional and financial support, limited experiences navigating college life, and first generation college students frequently raised in single-parent homes. Nationally, fewer than two percent of student mothers complete a college degree by age 30. At St. Catherine's, this population of mothers in the traditional baccalaureate program had a retention rate at least 10 percent lower than other student parent groups.

Using its Office of Adolescent Health funding, Access and Success piloted Steps to Success, a program aimed at improving the academic success of these young, at-risk student mothers. The pilot goals focus on academic success, financial stability, social connectedness, physical and emotional health, and leadership development. To participate, interested students were required to complete an application process. In 2009, eight low-income, single parent students between the ages of 17-22, in their first or second year of college, were selected to participate in the pilot. Due to the success of the program efforts, eight additional mothers were added to the program in 2012.

The program is tailored to help meet the unique needs of young student mothers in four ways:

- **Bi-weekly meetings.** Students learn practical information about parenting, finances, studying techniques, and balancing their complex roles as students, parents, and employees. Students are taught how to manage the expectations of academia, including how and when to approach their professors. They also attend small group presentations on topics such as stress management and sleep to support their physical and mental health.
- **Leadership training.** Students must complete a leadership component as part of the Steps to Success program. They can fulfill this requirement by volunteering in Mother-to-Mother, a program where they share their personal story with high school teen parents, encouraging them to continue their education. Participants can also fulfill the requirement through involvement in campus student government, speaking to state government officials about the needs of student parents, or leading a lunch meeting for other student parents. This requirement helps students build confidence and autonomy, skills that benefit them in the classroom and beyond.
- **Referrals to appropriate resources.** Program staff refer students to resources they need, both on and off campus, such as assistance with custody proceedings and securing child support.



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- **Annual stipend for non-tuition expenses.** Balancing the multiple demands as both students and parents, many of the mothers would not be able to complete program requirements without the \$1,350 stipend as an incentive.

Efforts have been made to demonstrate the effectiveness of the initial pilot program. Within the University, the retention rate of program participants was consistently higher than those of a comparison group of student parents with similar demographics and academic levels. Also, the grades of those students participating in the program were higher than those of the comparison group, with participating students less likely to receive a C- or lower in their classes. Students participating in the program were also more likely to complete individual courses; only seven participants withdrew from a course compared to 11 in the comparison group.

### Contact Information

Elizabeth A. Gardner, MA  
Minnesota Department of Health  
Community and Family Health Division  
Maternal and Child Health Section  
Student Parent Grant Coordinator  
Phone: (651) 201-5411  
[Elizabeth.gardner@state.mn.us](mailto:Elizabeth.gardner@state.mn.us)

Joan Demeules, LSW, MA  
St. Catherine University  
Associate Director, Counseling and Student Development  
Director, Access and Success Program  
Phone: (651) 690-7870  
[jmdemeules@stkate.edu](mailto:jmdemeules@stkate.edu)