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Midlands Voices: We need to do more to support expecting mothers during and after pregnancy

Sara A. Myers

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Why is it hard to be pregnant on a college campus and does pregnancy have to derail college dreams?

I know firsthand the shame of being pregnant on a college campus. As a 19-year-old college basketball player, I found out I was pregnant in the fall of my sophomore year. I can't articulate how difficult it was to tell my boyfriend, coach, parents and teammates about my pregnancy. I never really told my classmates or instructors, they just realized it when it was obvious.

After I told my parents, I overheard my dad saying I would never finish college. There were rumors in my hometown about who my baby's father was. It was a surprise to everyone, including me: I was the high school valedictorian, the person who followed the rules and did everything by the book, including taking my daily birth control pill. However, I was extremely fortunate. My boyfriend was someone I wanted to (and did) marry, he was unsure of his degree program and decided to get a job that had benefits to support our new family. While we wanted to have children someday, it would have ideally been 10 years later. I was determined not to let having a child "keep me from my dreams." Hearing doubt from others only fueled my determination.

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I'm not saying it was easy. I kept playing basketball and stayed on my original course schedule. That meant 15-hour days with workouts starting at 5:30 a.m. and night courses until 8:40 three nights per week. Then homework, housework and do it all again. But I did it and I didn't stop at undergrad. I worked my way through graduate school, became the first in the history of my institution to receive a competitive national research fellowship during my doctoral studies. I even secured a coveted RO1 grant with a first submission within five years of starting my faculty position. I would argue that I would not have achieved any of these goals without having my unexpected pregnancy. Prior to having our daughter, I was only a morning person and found it difficult to do homework in the evening. I was motivated by things I liked but struggled to complete jobs or tasks that weren't natural or one of my "passions." Becoming a mother gave me a toughness and resolve like never before. I developed the discipline to mentally focus even when I was exhausted and to do things that were uncomfortable. I also became more efficient and able to problem solve like never before.

Instead of asking the question "How harmful will overturning Roe v. Wade be for higher education?", why aren't we asking "How can we support expecting mothers during and after their pregnancy?" If supportive programs and policies could be developed, we could retain this generation and have the opportunity to educate the next generation of children who were not aborted. Such programs would likely benefit students facing difficult personal situations other than pregnancy. I completely admit that I did not want a child when I was pregnant. But all I can think about is my 19-year-old daughter now, who is a freshman at the institution at which I work (and was pregnant). She is studying to become an early childhood educator and she works at a center teaching young children with autism.

She has already impacted many families' lives and she is just getting started. Where would the world be with at least 600,000 more young people per year to serve, innovate, entertain and teach in our society? The truth is we will never know, but maybe we can start to find out.

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