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Supporting faculty parents in professional development: Case studies, recommendations, and a call for inclusive approaches

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Abstract

Educational development programs are often scheduled during academic breaks to encourage faculty participation. However, these timing decisions can unintentionally create barriers for faculty who are also parents, particularly during summer and school breaks when childcare options are scarce. This article examines case studies from two institutions that implemented childcare support strategies to facilitate faculty participation in professional development. While both initiatives achieved success, they highlight the limitations of addressing a systemic societal issue with grassroots, localized solutions. This discussion offers lessons learned, practical recommendations, and a call for equity-focused, inclusive approaches to better support faculty caregivers in professional development programs.

Keywords: faculty development, childcare, faculty caregivers, life-work balance

Participation in faculty development is widely encouraged and even mandated at some higher education institutions. However, certain barriers can limit the inclusion of all faculty members. Among these, family caregiving responsibilities have received limited attention in the

context of educational development. While existing research has highlighted gaps in faculty advancement linked to caregiving roles (Kim & Moser, 2021, among others), the specific impact of these responsibilities on participation in professional development programs remains underexplored.

This article seeks to address this gap by presenting two case studies of initiatives that provided childcare support during faculty development events to promote more inclusive participation. It also examines the challenges encountered in implementing these efforts and offers actionable recommendations for overcoming them. While the research broadly considers caregiving-related disparities among faculty, it primarily focuses on women in parenting roles, who are disproportionately affected, as noted in the literature (Moors et al., 2022; Radcliffe & Cassell, 2015).

Literature Review

This brief review provides context on faculty parenting and caregiving, emphasizing intersections with faculty development. To highlight faculty caregivers' experiences, we incorporate qualitative and quantitative evidence of gender disparities related to caregiving, including insights beyond traditional scholarly sources. Gaps in the literature underscore the urgency of elevating this conversation in academic discourse and addressing the challenges faculty caregivers face.

Faculty Caregivers

Multiple factors contribute to inequities in higher education, including gender and parenting status. Women make up 44% of tenure-track faculty, but only 36% of full professors (AAUW, n.d.), and are disproportionately represented in contingent roles such as lecturer and instructor. As the AAUP (2022) notes, "women remain concentrated in the lower faculty ranks and in contingent positions—the least

secure and worst remunerated teaching positions" (p. 17). The fact that nearly two-thirds (61.5%) of U.S. faculty hold contingent appointments underscores the widespread precarity of academic employment and its link to systemic inequities (AAUP, 2022).

Childbearing decisions further illustrate the complex interplay between gender and inequities. Many academic women delay or avoid having children due to lengthy schooling, job searches, relocations, and tenure-track or increasingly precarious positions. Among women aged 30–39, 38.8% with a graduate or professional degree remain childless, compared to 13.1% of those without a high school diploma and 20.4% with a high school diploma but no college (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Those who do have children face persistent work-life challenges. Sorcinelli (1988) noted childcare challenges decades ago, and they remain relevant. Diego-Medrano and Salazar (2021) found that half of the work-life challenges identified by faculty related to home or family responsibilities, including childcare.

Economic disparities further exacerbate these challenges for academic women, especially those with caregiving responsibilities. Salaries influence childbearing decisions and caregiving needs, yet the gender pay gap in academia persists: women earn 82 cents for every dollar their male counterparts earn (AAUP, 2022). Moreover, academic women—particularly women of color—are less likely to earn tenure than their male or childless peers, with outcomes varying by discipline (Kim & Moser, 2021). In a study of 83,000 scientists, just 27% of mothers achieved tenure, compared to 48% of fathers and 46% of childless women—reflecting mothers' delayed early-career productivity (Kim & Moser, 2021). Contributing factors include unequal service workloads (Domingo et al., 2020) and the "motherhood penalty" in salary and promotion (Budig & England, 2001). Conversely, fathers have historically benefited from a "fatherhood bonus" in career and salary advantages (Hodges & Budig, 2010; Rodgers & Stratton, 2010).

In academia and beyond, women tend to bear the childcare and household labor burden disproportionately, increasing stress and affecting career development (Aviv et al., 2024; Ciciolla & Luthar,

2019). The *Fair Play Report* (Aviv et al., 2024) shows that cognitive labor—the mental load of managing household tasks—falls largely on women, negatively affecting their mental health, relationships, and overall well-being. This research ties closely to the caregiving challenges experienced by academic women during the pandemic, which exposed similar inequities in household and professional responsibilities; time-use surveys showed women lost one hour of research time per day compared to childless men, and mothers lost twice as much as fathers (Deryugina et al., 2021). The most disruptions occurred for families with children younger than seven years, particularly for women with children younger than one year of age, who lost nearly two hours of research time per day (Deryugina et al., 2021).

This perception of inequality as structurally-embedded rather than individually-caused underscores the need for institutional policies supporting caregivers. Yet such policies remain inadequate. The U.S. is one of only six countries without national paid leave (Miller, 2021) and ranks second-to-last among 41 high-income countries on metrics such as childcare affordability, quality, and parental leave (Gromada & Richardson, 2021). Within academia, access to benefits like paid parental leave varies widely; one analysis found that at research universities, leave ranged from 0 to 32 weeks (Guth, n.d.).

Childcare and Faculty Development Programming

While research has addressed gender disparities and caregiving's impact on faculty advancement, little attention has been paid to how caregiving affects participation in faculty development. This gap is particularly striking in sources that directly shape the field of educational development.

A keyword search for "childcare" in *To Improve the Academy* (1982–2024)—a flagship publication for educational developers—returned only eight articles. The most substantive, Olsen (1991), advocated for expanded campus childcare to support both individual faculty needs and institutional diversity goals. More recent pieces (e.g., Chen et al., 2023; McCorkle et al., 2024; Sheffield & Moore, 2023) mention the

issue only briefly. Brinko et al. (2004) noted campus childcare centers as contributors to faculty developers' quality of life, but did not pursue the topic in depth. Hilsen and Rutherford (1991) went further, dismissing childcare as one of many "excuses [that] sprout like tropical undergrowth" (p. 262), alongside hockey practice and nail appointments. Their solution—that facilitators simply show "the appropriate amount of persistence" (Hilsen & Rutherford, 1991, p. 262)—implicitly placed responsibility on individual caregivers rather than institutions.

A similar search in the *International Journal for Academic Development* (1996–2024) yielded only six articles, most with peripheral mentions. Childcare appeared in discussions of STEM faculty attrition (Christian et al., 2023), postdoctoral and student support (Lueddeke, 1997; McAlpine et al., 2017), and difficulties recruiting female research participants (Iqbal, 2014). These brief references offer little engagement with caregiving as a structural barrier to participation in faculty development. Given the framing of educational development as "pink-collar labor" (Bernhagen & Gravett, 2017), the near-silence on childcare is especially noteworthy.

A few sources outside these journals offer a broader context. Mason et al. (2005) and Bianchi et al. (2012) affirm that women—including academic women—continue to bear a disproportionate share of caregiving and household labor. Yet Monroe et al. (2008) found that many faculty women still perceive childcare as a personal concern, not a matter for institutional responsibility. Reichlin Cruse et al. (2021) documented a 14 percentage-point decline in campus-based childcare centers between 2004 and 2019, a trend further exacerbated by the pandemic (Field, 2021). Sheets (2021), in a dissertation focused on student-parents, emphasized the importance of campus childcare centers for faculty and staff, but also noted their diminishing capacity due to staffing shortages and closures.

Overall, the literature reveals a consistent lack of engagement with the structural challenges caregiving poses for faculty participation in educational development. Despite decades of research documenting gendered caregiving burdens, references to childcare in key journals

remain minimal and largely superficial. This absence reflects the broader marginalization of caregiving in academic discourse and practice.

In response to these long-standing gaps in both practice and literature, this study presents two case studies of grassroots, bottom-up efforts (Capeheart & Milovanovic, 2020) designed to support caregiving faculty through targeted, localized interventions. The grassroots efforts featured here illustrate how institutions—and specifically educational developers and centers for teaching and learning (CTLs)—can begin to close this gap. These case studies offer concrete examples of how localized leadership can foster more inclusive faculty development by addressing caregiving needs directly, even in the absence of broader institutional mandates.

Methodology

This article presents two case studies that originated as independent initiatives aimed at addressing caregiving challenges on college campuses. These efforts highlight the significant gap in information on caregiving within the POD Network and the broader educational development field. As valuable contributions to the larger discourse on caregiving in higher education, these case studies emphasize localized solutions that respond to specific campus needs.

The theoretical framework utilized in this work is grounded in the concept of grassroots justice (Capeheart & Milovanovic, 2020), which focuses on community-led efforts to combat systemic inequities. By prioritizing group-level advocacy and the active participation of those most affected, grassroots justice contrasts with top-down approaches. This perspective is particularly relevant to caregiving in the U.S., where a lack of national or state-level support often leaves individuals—primarily women—to seek their own solutions. Consequently, collaborative, community-based strategies are essential for promoting equity and justice (Aviv et al., 2024; Calarco, 2024).

Grassroots initiatives are vital in addressing the caregiving gaps prevalent in higher education, where systemic supports frequently fall short. Through collective action and adaptability, these initiatives can tackle local challenges and inspire meaningful institutional change. The two case studies presented demonstrate scalable, community-driven solutions to caregiving issues on campuses, showcasing their immediate impact and broader potential to create a more inclusive and responsive higher education environment for caregiving faculty. Viewed through this lens, grassroots justice serves as both a conceptual foundation and a practical approach for reimagining support systems.

The collaboration that led to these case studies began with a call for ideas on the POD Network listserv. The author of Case Study 2 sought examples of caregiver support programs, and the author of Case Study 1—who had successfully implemented such a program—was the sole respondent. Their subsequent exchange forged a partnership that culminated in the case studies presented here.

Each case reflects distinct campus contexts, cultures, and challenges, offering insights into the effective operation of grassroots approaches across diverse environments. The collaborative process underscores the methodological significance of grassroots justice, highlighting localized and context-sensitive strategies for tackling systemic caregiving inequities in higher education.

Data Collection

Data for the case studies were drawn from multiple sources. In both, anonymous feedback surveys were developed specifically for the events they evaluated. While not intended to support the broader arguments of this article, they serve as models for other practitioners interested in similar interventions. In Case 2, findings from an institutional report on faculty caregivers were also incorporated to provide additional context and support for the program's goals.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using basic descriptive statistics and thematic review. Given the small number of participants, findings are not generalizable but are shared as illustrative examples of the potential value of grassroots initiatives. These cases offer practical models for others developing caregiving-supportive programs, while highlighting the need for future research to expand on this work.

The University of Northern Iowa Institutional Review Board (IRB) administratively reviewed this study and determined it did not meet the definition of Human Subjects Research and thus did not require IRB approval.

Case Study 1: University of Northern Iowa

University of Northern Iowa is a regional comprehensive university in Cedar Falls, Iowa, serving approximately 8,000 full-time equivalent (FTE) undergraduate and graduate students. In 2018, several faculty parents identified a significant caregiving gap: faculty were required to work two days before the fall semester began, but campus childcare was closed during the three-week August interim between summer and fall terms—including those mandatory workdays. Compounding the issue, K-12 schools had not yet resumed, and many summer care programs for school-age children were unavailable.

These required workdays included the annual Fall Faculty Workshop, organized by the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) in partnership with the Office of the Provost. Held the Thursday before fall classes, the Workshop typically focuses on teaching-related topics such as artificial intelligence and accessibility. Departments often scheduled additional meetings or retreats that Friday. Faculty also used this time to prepare syllabi, meet advisees, facilitate student auditions, and fulfill other academic responsibilities.

2019 Initiative. To address the childcare gap during this mandatory work period, the first author—a faculty member directly affected—formed and chaired an informal committee in 2019. The committee organized a free, "pop-up" childcare service during the half-day Faculty Workshop. The service accommodated children from six weeks to school age and was held in two meeting rooms in the student union, the same building as the workshop.

Childcare providers were highly qualified, background-checked university students—mostly education or communicative sciences and disorders majors—with relevant certifications and extensive childcare experience. Children were divided into two age groups: infants through age two, and ages three to school age. Each group had a lead provider, paid a higher wage, who managed the schedule, activities, and safety protocols.

Snacks and lunch were provided for children and providers. The committee purchased supplies, borrowed first-aid kits from other campus units, and established check-in and safety procedures. Providers received a brief orientation before the event. United Faculty, the faculty union, funded the initiative and provided administrative support and advocacy.

Faculty Feedback. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with no behavioral or safety incidents reported. Of 22 registered children, 19 attended, representing 11 families—including several dual-faculty households. Ten faculty members completed the follow-up survey: six identified as female, one as male, and three did not specify gender. Respondents represented four of the university's five academic colleges. Nine reported they would not have attended the Workshop without the childcare option.

Survey results (see Table 1), while limited in scope and not intended as formal research, highlight the initiative's immediate impact. Faculty emphasized that the service enabled their participation in critical professional development activities, underscoring the value of addressing caregiving gaps in academic life (Table 2).

Table 1. ***Faculty childcare follow-up survey results, 2019***

Survey Question	Response	Response	Notes
Please rate the quality of care (activities, provider credentials, etc.)	4 on 5-point scale: 1 (9.1%)	5 on 5-point scale: 10 (90.9%)	There were no responses 3 or lower on 5-point scale, from 0 (poor) to 5 (excellent).
If childcare had NOT been available at the workshop, would you have still attended?	Yes: 1 (9.1%)	No 10 (90.9%)	In-person faculty workshop participation was the only option in 2019.
Respondent gender	Male 1 (12.5%)	Female 7 (87.5%)	There were eight responses to this optional, free-text question. There were no responses indicating genders other than male or female.
Faculty academic department/ college	Department: Psychology, Library, Earth & Environmental Science, Art, School of Music, Languages & Literatures, Curriculum & Instruction, Biology, Educational Psychology	College: Library (1) Humanities, Arts, & Sciences (5); Social & Behavioral Sciences (1); Education (2)	There were nine responses to this optional, free-text question. Departments reported represent 4 of 5 academic colleges (College of Business not reported).

Table 2. Follow-up survey qualitative items, 2019

Question	Response Themes	Representative Responses
Are there other times or events throughout the year when childcare on campus would be useful?	• Certain times of year remain especially challenging due to limited or unavailable childcare.	• *Entire week prior to fall semester* • *MLK Day* • *Over breaks (e.g. Spring Break)* • *Summer workshops/training* • *[K-12] school-professional development dates* • *Fall faculty meeting!*

(Contd.)

Question	Response Themes	Representative Responses

Feel free to provide any additional feedback.	• Respondents expressed strong appreciation, citing:
	  ○ The high quality of care and provider expertise
	  ○ Lack of other options
	  ○ Frustration with systemic childcare gaps and absent solutions
	• No negative comments.
		• *This was an extremely helpful service. I was surprised that it was offered because UNI, like other US institutions, so rarely considers the burdens of their employees with young families.*
		• *The students who provided care were amazing. They were well-prepared, planned engaging activities, and dealt with kids' separation anxiety with calm and expertise.*
		• *Thank you for addressing the critical need for childcare at UNI. My spouse and I both work here, but with no nearby family or strong support network, childcare has been a major source of stress. The CDC waitlist is long, its hours don't align with faculty schedules, and there's a severe shortage of care for children under two. For school-aged children, there are no camps or drop-in options the week before public schools start or during midweek early dismissals.*
		• *This was a well-organized event with excellent providers. As a single parent, I felt supported and included because of the childcare component. Thank you to the committee for your thoughtful work on behalf of working families.*

One major challenge during implementation was ensuring that all new faculty, particularly recent hires unfamiliar with campus processes, were informed about the childcare offering. Department heads were asked to share the information, but communication was inconsistent, and some new faculty may not have received it. United Faculty also sent notifications to all faculty, but many new hires lacked institutional email accounts during the summer, and their personal emails were not available to United Faculty or the committee. As a result, some were excluded from the childcare sign-up and related communications.

Childcare providers also encountered a few minor issues during the event. Some children, initially unfamiliar with the providers, needed a brief adjustment period. In a few cases, siblings placed in separate age groups asked to stay together, prompting room changes. Providers also expressed interest in taking children to other campus locations; however, planned "field trips" to the library makerspace and greenhouse were canceled due to liability concerns.

(For the complete 2019 report, see Appendix A: https://scholarworks.uni.edu/facpub/6764/.*)*

2020 Challenges and Adaptations. Following the success of 2019, the committee planned a partnership with Panther Camps, a Wellness and Recreation Services program offering school-age care on non-school days at parent expense. The goal was to shift older children to this existing infrastructure using a cost-sharing model between United Faculty and participating families. However, the onset of COVID-19 shifted all faculty development programming online, and the childcare plans were canceled. The committee had secured external funding from the Academic Mamas Foundation, which generously allowed the grant to be deferred for future use.

2021 Expansion and Relocation. In response to faculty feedback and recommendations from the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, the committee expanded the pop-up childcare service to two full days in 2021. This extension supported faculty attending Thursday's Fall Faculty Workshop, Friday departmental meetings, and other professional obligations, including syllabus preparation and student advising.

Due to new university Risk Management guidelines restricting childcare to the campus childcare center (closed those days), the event was relocated to the Catholic Student Center across the street from campus. Three rooms were reserved at a reasonable cost, and insurance was arranged through the Catholic Archdiocese.

The expanded service accommodated 15 children, aged 1 to 10, from 10 faculty families across seven departments in three of the university's five academic colleges. All but two families required care

for both days. The total cost of $3,581 was partially offset by a $1,000 Academic Mamas Foundation grant, with remaining expenses covered by United Faculty.

Provider recruitment and logistics followed the 2019 model, with added COVID-19 precautions. Providers and children over age two wore masks, and all providers submitted proof of vaccination prior to employment.

Faculty Feedback. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Faculty praised the quality and convenience of care and emphasized how the service enabled participation in key professional activities. Many highlighted its impact on their well-being and productivity, with several expressing deep gratitude for the support. Detailed survey results are provided in Table 3 and Table 4.

Table 3. Faculty childcare follow-up survey results, 2021

Survey Question	Response	Response	Notes
Please rate the quality of care (activities, provider credentials, etc.)	4 on 5-point scale: 1 (12.5%)	5 on 5-point scale: 7 (87.5%)	There were no responses 3 or lower on 5-point scale, from 0 (poor) to 5 (excellent).
If childcare had NOT been available at the workshop, would you have still attended?	Yes 1 (12.5%)	No or Not Fully 5 (62.5%)	Two additional respondents (25.0%) indicated they would attend if a virtual option were provided (as it was this year).
Respondent gender	Male 0 (0%)	Female or Woman 5 (100%)	There were five responses to this optional, free-text question. There were no responses indicating genders other than female or woman.
Faculty academic department/ college	Department: Marketing (1); Languages & Literatures (2); School of Music (2); Social Work; PNTA (1)	College: Business (1); Humanities, Arts, & Sciences (4); Social & Behavioral Sciences (1)	There were six responses to this optional, free-text question. Departments reported represent 3 of 5 academic colleges (Education and Library not reported).

Table 4. Follow-up survey qualitative items, 2021

Question	Response Themes	Representative Responses
What caregiving needs/gaps do you experience that United Faculty and/or UNI could or should address?	• Faculty experience gaps during certain times of year and when schedules change. • Faculty noted lack of childcare in our geographic area (childcare desert).	• *Childcare gaps at the beginning and end of semesters* • *[Local] schools will dismiss students at 1:50pm the first week of semester. I will be teaching at that time on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Need to address this issue* • *Child care is hard to come by in our area. I was on the waitlist for a spot at the UNI CDC [Child Development Center] for a year, and never got a spot. Now that my child is in elementary school the problem has more to do with schools in the area having breaks that make it very difficult for professors who are parents.* • *I have no childcare at moment and am desperate for help. I've put out calls on Career Services and have been on the waitlist at CDC since my daughter was four months in utero. IA [Iowa] has a childcare crisis, and parents are left on their own. Two days of childcare was a HUGE gift.*
Feel free to provide any additional feedback.	• Participants gave positive feedback and expressed deep gratitude. • There were no negative comments.	• *Thank you! This was my children's first ever experience in a daycare and it was lovely.* • *Thank you again! This is the first childcare I've had access to since our daughter was born, and I am so tired.*

(For full 2021 report, see Appendix B in supplemental resources, available at: https://scholarworks.uni.edu/facpub/6764/).

Reflections and Future Directions. Over two years of offering pop-up childcare during the Fall Faculty Workshop, several benefits and challenges emerged. The availability of free, conveniently located care enabled greater faculty participation in both required and encouraged activities. The initiative also surfaced broader, previously unaddressed concerns about caregiving support on campus. However, managing

the program proved too time- and labor-intensive for the faculty women leading it through a grassroots committee. Despite meetings and shared reports, university leadership showed little interest in pursuing sustainable solutions. Ultimately, the organizers, in partnership with United Faculty, chose to discontinue the program.

In response, the committee broadened its focus to raise awareness and collect more data on caregiving needs. Efforts included advocating for a campuswide childcare needs assessment across all employees and drafting caregiving-related questions for a benefits survey. The committee also worked to elevate student caregiving concerns. National data show that 22% of U.S. undergraduates are caregivers, and they are about ten times less likely to graduate within six years compared to their peers (Cruse et al., 2021; NCES, n.d.).

Additionally, the committee launched an informal caregivers network, including an email group and occasional in-person gatherings. Participants consistently express appreciation for the connection and support the network provides.

A Caregiving Task Force was set to convene following the benefits survey and represented a critical step toward institutional awareness and expanded resources; it's unclear whether it was ever formed. A holistic approach would offer the university opportunities to better support faculty, staff, and student caregivers, with positive implications for retention, wellness, inclusion, and academic success.

Case Study 2: Auburn University

This case study details a faculty development initiative at Auburn University to support faculty caregivers during the Summer Course ReDesign (CRD) seminar, a cornerstone program aimed at redesigning courses for student-centered learning. Building on lessons from Case Study 1, the initiative addressed participation barriers for faculty with caregiving responsibilities—challenges that intensified during the pandemic.

Background. Since 2015, the CRD seminar has supported over a thousand faculty in improving their teaching. Participants receive a professional development stipend, which explicitly excludes childcare expenses. In summer 2021, three faculty members requested to use their stipends for childcare during the seminar. These requests brought attention to the difficulty of balancing professional development with caregiving, especially amid pandemic disruptions.

In response, the Associate Director for Educational Development (second author) explored ways to offer meaningful support. Conversations with the author of Case Study 1 informed the approach, offering practical insights into grassroots childcare solutions and underscoring the importance of flexibility, collaboration, and attention to logistics.

Identifying the Need. A survey of 60 seminar participants assessed caregiving responsibilities and available support. Three faculty identified a critical need for childcare. Follow-up conversations revealed challenges including children with special needs, limited childcare options, and financial strain.

Developing a Solution. Drawing directly from the lessons of Case Study 1, the Associate Director explored multiple approaches to supporting faculty caregivers. The pop-up childcare model from Case Study 1 informed initial discussions but also revealed key barriers, including liability concerns and the difficulty of coordinating care without knowing how many children would attend, their ages, or any special needs or health considerations. These uncertainties made on-site care impractical within the available time frame, prompting a shift toward more flexible alternatives.

Ultimately, the focus shifted to direct financial support. In collaboration with HR and Provost's Office, a pilot program offered $500 childcare stipends to faculty with demonstrated need. Recipients could use the funds for childcare during the seminar week and received a curated list of providers. To increase accessibility, a second fully online seminar was added later in the summer.

Results

The pilot initiative successfully addressed immediate barriers for faculty caregivers and highlighted the potential for similar approaches at other institutions. All three faculty who applied for the childcare stipend were able to fully participate in the seminar, and their feedback underscored the value of this support. One participant noted that the stipend alleviated significant stress and allowed them to focus entirely on the seminar's content and activities. Faculty who did not require the stipend expressed appreciation for the institution's efforts to recognize and address their colleagues' caregiving challenges. The introduction of a second session further enhanced the program's accessibility. Faculty with school-aged children were able to attend the in-person session scheduled immediately after the spring term while children were still in school; those managing other obligations participated in the online session later in the summer. This dual-format approach boosted participation and underscored the value of flexibility in meeting diverse faculty needs.

Challenges

Administrative concerns about perceived inequity limited the promotion of the childcare stipend, possibly preventing some eligible faculty from accessing support. While the stipend eased financial strain, it didn't address the limited availability of reliable care and some faculty struggled to find providers.

Lessons Learned and Future Directions

The approach described here owes much to the insights from Case Study 1. Without those early conversations, the second author would likely have spent considerable time rediscovering the same lessons. Thus, one noteable takeaway is the power of informal networks and

importance of asking for guidance. Sharing lessons learned, even from small-scale approaches, can save others time, effort, and frustration.

Future efforts should prioritize advocacy for institutional support and policies that address caregiving challenges comprehensively. Engaging campus leaders in conversations about the economic and academic benefits of supporting faculty caregiver participation in professional development is critical. Additionally, institutions might consider integrating caregiving support into broader well-being and belonging initiatives, recognizing that caregiving intersects with other dimensions of identity and experience. Educational development programs are well-positioned to lead these efforts—not just by offering support, but by modeling inclusive practices in the design and scheduling of professional development programs.

From Case 2 to the Culture

Like many communities nationwide, the Auburn community is facing a severe childcare supply-and-demand crisis—one that underscores the need for universities to address caregiving challenges systemically. In response, the local AAUP chapter, led by faculty advocates such as Dr. Tracy Witte, a professor of Psychology and mother of a young child, launched a campuswide childcare survey in spring 2023. The goal was to understand the scope of the issue and offer actionable recommendations to university leadership.

Originating from concerns raised within AAUP's executive committee, the survey was independently administered to all full-time employees and received 1,500 responses. Respondents were 68% female, 30% male, and 2% nonbinary or unspecified. The results revealed stark disparities, with women disproportionately affected by childcare barriers.

Key findings included difficulty securing summer care—over 40% of those needing care for May 2023 had not finalized plans by April. Financial strain was also prominent, as local childcare costs often exceeded affordability, especially with inflation outpacing salary

increases. Emotional stress was acute among women, driven by inadequate care options and the pressures of balancing work and caregiving. A lack of transparency in employee recruitment was also apparent: 61% of those who relocated were unaware of the limited childcare landscape. Notably, 30% of respondents had considered leaving their jobs due to related stress.

In response, the AAUP chapter successfully advocated for a university task force to study the issue, benchmark peer institutions, and propose sustainable solutions—a critical step toward systemic change.

For many caregivers, the survey itself was validating, offering a rare opportunity to voice frustrations and feel seen. This aligns with the broader claims of this paper: raising awareness and creating space for dialogue are essential first steps toward institutional transformation. The findings also underscore the need to integrate caregiving into inclusion efforts.

A Third Approach: Vendor-Based Childcare

A vendor-based childcare solution was offered at the 2024 POD Network Conference in Chicago. During registration, attendees could cite their childcare needs, prompting a follow-up email requesting details about children's ages and specific requirements, as well as the times and days care was needed. This service covered all conference sessions and extended to after-hours evening care during extracurricular events.

As the second author, I share my personal experience in alignment with the grassroots justice framework (Capeheart & Milovanovic, 2020), to raise awareness of this underrecognized resource. My two children, then ages 3 and 6, attended and had a positive experience. Two dedicated rooms staffed by professional caregivers offered crafts, games, and short "field trips" around the venue. Seamless check-in and attentive care enabled me to fully participate in the conference—including after-hours events. While such services are costly, the return—enabling

participation by caregivers who might otherwise be excluded—is significant. Childcare at conferences is a concrete expression of inclusion, and one other organizations should emulate.

Discussion

"Other countries have social safety nets. The U.S. has women."

This viral statement by sociologist Jessica Calarco (2020) captured a systemic truth: The U.S. relies on individual caregivers—especially women—to fill institutional gaps. This paper explores that reality through the lens of faculty participation in professional development programs offered by centers for teaching and learning (CTLs). While grounded in higher education, the challenges discussed reflect broader issues across academia and the workforce.

In place of systemic change—which remains slow-moving and often outside the control of educational developers—we advocate for grassroots strategies that address caregiving barriers where and when we can. These locally-driven efforts, while limited in scope, offer meaningful support to caregiving faculty and help surface institutional blind spots that might otherwise go unexamined.

This orientation aligns with Capeheart and Milovanovic's (2020) grassroots justice framework, which emphasizes community-based, collective responses to structural inequities. As they explain, "grassroots struggles are necessarily group processes and focus on group-level justice… [and] often allow for a broader understanding of justice by those engaged in and witness to these struggles" (Capeheart & Milovanovic, 2020, p. 159). When caregiving is framed not as an individual obstacle but as a shared concern, new possibilities emerge for action, visibility, and change—even within constrained systems.

The three approaches explored in this article—pop-up childcare, stipends, and vendor-based care—illustrate the trade-offs involved in designing support. The pop-up model emphasized accessibility and community but required significant labor and lacked sustainability.

The stipend model offered flexible, individualized support but placed logistical burdens on faculty and lacked shared experience. Vendor-based childcare, as seen in the conference example, combined scalability with professional care and reduced institutional lift, but likely came at a higher cost.

Together, these models reflect possibilities within current constraints and offer practical strategies for institutions committed to more inclusive educational development.

Limitations

The case studies presented here focused specifically on faculty and did not address the needs of other campus stakeholders, such as staff and students, nor did they explore caregiving related to elder care or other dependents. Additionally, they did not fully account for the limited care options available to families with medically vulnerable or special-needs children. As examples from only two U.S. institutions, these cases do not capture the diversity of higher education contexts. Still, they demonstrate that even short-term solutions to childcare gaps can positively impact faculty participation in professional development.

Recommendations

Expanding campus childcare, as Olsen (1991) advocated, remains essential—especially amid pandemic-related closures and the expiration of federal childcare stabilization funds (ChildCare Aware, 2020; Watkins et al., 2024). While such investments can support faculty and improve morale, retention, and productivity, they require institutional commitment beyond what centers for teaching and learning (CTLs) can manage alone. Educational developers can advocate for systemic solutions but must avoid assuming full responsibility, which risks reinforcing faculty development as "pink collar" labor (Bernhagen & Gravett, 2017).

CTLs can take meaningful, manageable steps by aligning programming with caregiving realities. Faculty development often falls during

intersessions, when childcare is least available. Offering hybrid/virtual formats, scheduling events at more caregiver-friendly times, and collaborating with campus units to provide on-site care during key events can expand access without exceeding CTL capacity.

At the institutional level, integrating caregiving into recruitment, onboarding, and employee support systems is crucial. Centralized resources—such as childcare referrals, digital platforms, and community partnerships—can ease caregiving burdens. Public-private models, like those in Iowa that expanded childcare slots and strengthened retention in early childhood employment (Iowa Women's Foundation, 2024), offer replicable examples.

Universal Design principles also support broader inclusion in faculty development. Hybrid and flexible formats, as seen in the case studies, increase accessibility. CTLs can lead these efforts, while institutions ensure that any caregiving services meet safety and liability standards in collaboration with early childhood experts. Still, hybrid programming alone cannot resolve systemic caregiving challenges; ongoing institutional investment is needed.

A persistent barrier to progress is the lack of awareness among decision-makers, many of whom lack direct caregiving experience. While national media has elevated this issue, institutional leaders may underestimate its impact. Advocates must help connect caregiving gaps to core concerns—morale, recruitment, retention, and productivity (Fried, 2023; Zahneis, 2022). Systemic problems demand systemic solutions, not continued reliance on individual, often gendered, sacrifice.

Future Research

One important avenue for future research is determining the true costs of implementing or failing to implement support for faculty caregivers. This complex analysis could provide valuable data to make a compelling case for institutional investment. Additionally, researchers might explore innovative partnerships and funding models, such as public-private initiatives, to expand childcare availability while supporting employee retention.

Conclusion

Faculty caregivers—particularly women—face persistent structural inequities that limit their participation in professional development and advancement. These challenges have been magnified by campus childcare closures, the lack of national support systems, and the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The case studies presented here demonstrate that, while grassroots approaches can temporarily alleviate caregiving burdens, they are not sustainable without institutional support. On-site childcare fosters community but demands resources; stipends offer flexibility but shift responsibility to individuals. Both underscore the need for more comprehensive, equity-focused strategies.

The grassroots justice framework (Capeheart & Milovanovic, 2020) affirms the importance of community-driven solutions, but lasting change requires institutional investment. By integrating caregiving support into core priorities, higher education can begin to address long-standing disparities and create more inclusive, accessible environments for educational development.

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