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# Minnesota State University Mankato Counseling Center: Needs Assessment Survey of College Student Parents

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# MINNESOTA STATE UNIVERSITY MANKATO COUNSELING CENTER

## NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEY OF COLLEGE STUDENT PARENTS

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### Abstract

The Needs Assessment Survey of Student Parents was an exploratory study of descriptive data gathered from college students who are also parents. This study surveyed a sample of student parents at Minnesota State University Mankato. Student parents were asked to complete a confidential on-line survey of questions regarding their demographic information, their psychosocial needs, and their knowledge of The Counseling Center services. Data analysis revealed that, as a group, the respondents indicated their highest psychosocial needs to be in the areas of stress management, feeling burned out and financial concerns. The lowest expressed needs were in the categories of substance abuse, choosing a major and parenting a special needs child. Other findings, limitations and recommendations are also discussed.

### Introduction

In 1999 just 27% of college students were considered "traditional." Currently, the number of "non-traditional" students enrolling in part-time or full-time course work is on the rise. While traditional undergraduates are generally able to direct most of their energy toward their studies, student parents (especially single parents), and students who work full time have family and work responsibilities competing with school for their time, energy, and financial resources. Difficulties in obtaining child care and class schedules that do not mesh with work schedules are just two of the barriers that nontraditional students may encounter. In addition, nontraditional students seeking a college degree are less likely than traditional students to be enrolled in courses or have completed their degree after 5 years (Choy, 2002).

A literature review indicated that a considerable amount of case studies have been done regarding the challenges of parenting and being a student. Branscomb(2006)Cook, B. & King, J. (2005) and Regena(2007) all cited the significant strain student parents face when they have too little support as well as the increase in positive outcomes when university support is available. However, the literature was lacking a specific focus on the needs of student parents in relationship to what a campus counseling center could offer.

Financial constraints were often sighted as reasons parents were unable to complete their desired degree. According to the U.S. Department of Education(2002), 47 percent of low-income adult students aspired to earn a bachelor's degree in 1995-96; and, by 2001, only 7 percent had succeeded. Put in a larger context, 70 percent of the fastest growing jobs by 2010 will require a postsecondary degree, and yet, 80 million low-wage working adults lack that degree.

In many social service systems there is a commonly held belief that education is the direction to send parents who are struggling to make ends meet. However, once they arrive on campus are they aware of counseling services? What counseling services do they utilize? What are the psychosocial needs of this population?

The Needs Assessment Survey of Student Parents at Minnesota State University Mankato was aimed at starting to answer these questions. This project analyzes the data collected from a needs assessment survey and offers recommendations for future research as well as recommendations for future Counseling Center programming for student parents.

### Methods

This study was descriptive in nature. The design of the needs assessment survey allowed for qualitative and quantitative data. Thus, the study had a mixed method research design (Fowler, 2002). Student parents were invited to participate via flyers posted in the Counseling Center, a randomized list of e-mails generated from the Registrars Office of the entire student body and word of mouth. The author also invited student parents by speaking in a parenting class on campus and in the Non-Traditional Student Office on campus.

The survey consisted of nine questions that were answered via the on-line survey program "SurveyMonkey." The demographic information requested was as follows: Age, academic status, age of children, number of children, gender, single or co-parenting. Next the student parents were asked to rate their need for assistance in 16 areas (such as depression) using a likert scale with 0 being "no need" and 4 being "very high need." The student parents were then asked if they were aware of The Counseling Center's services and if they had utilized the services in the past and in what capacity. If they had not used the services they were asked to explain why.

### Data / Results

A total of 138 surveys were received. Of the 138 survey's received, 27 surveys were thrown out due to incomplete data, thus a total of 111 surveys were analyzed. The demographic information of the respondents revealed that the majority of students who completed the survey were 30 or older(58%), graduate students(48%) and female(76%). Demographics regarding parenting indicated that the majority of respondents were parenting one or two children(81%), under the age of 5(59%) and were co-parenting(76%).

Figure 1:

#### Student Parents' Expressed Psychosocial Needs

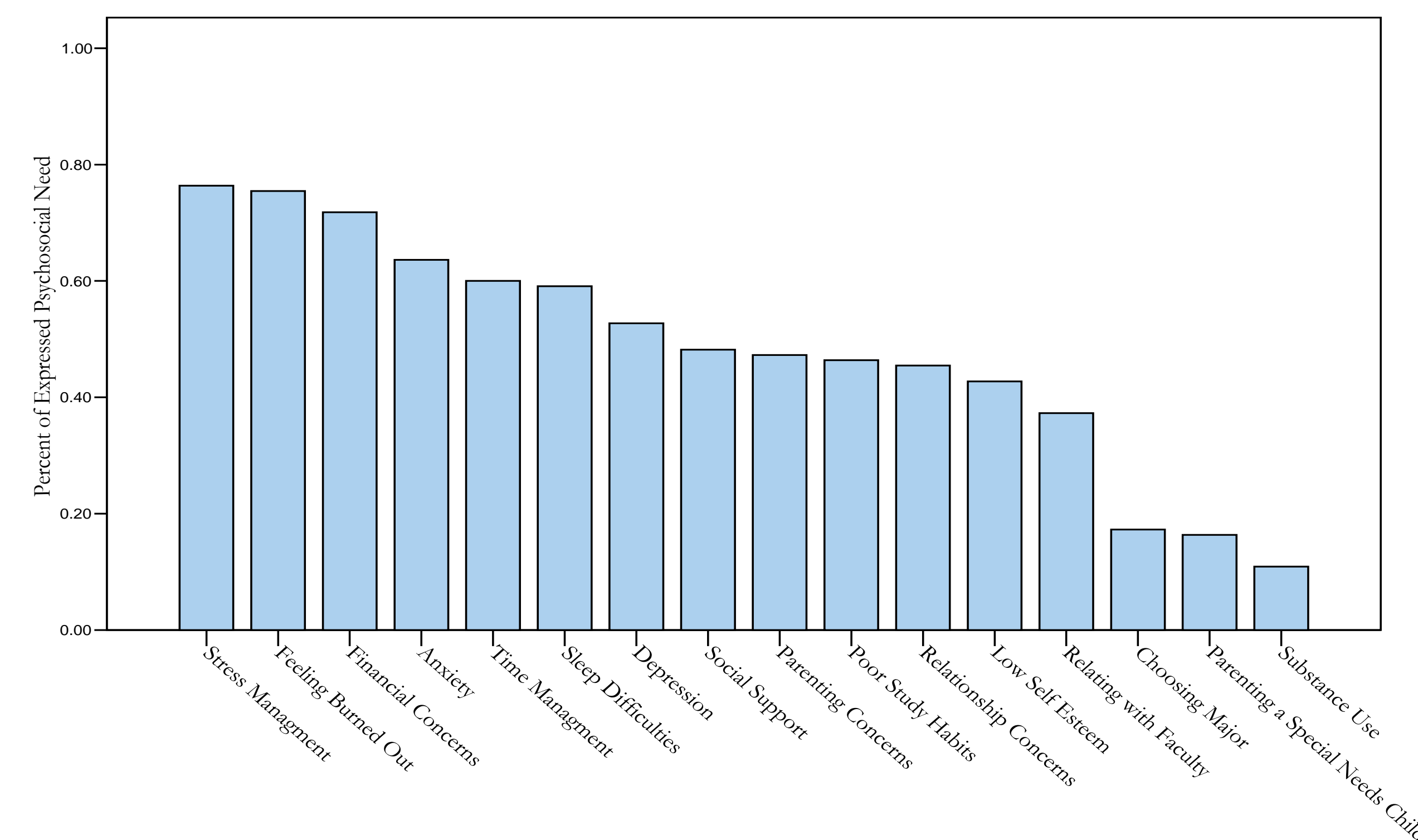


Figure 2:

**Student Parents' Response to the Question: "Are you aware that The Counseling Center provides psychological services for enrolled students for personal, social, and educational concerns?"**

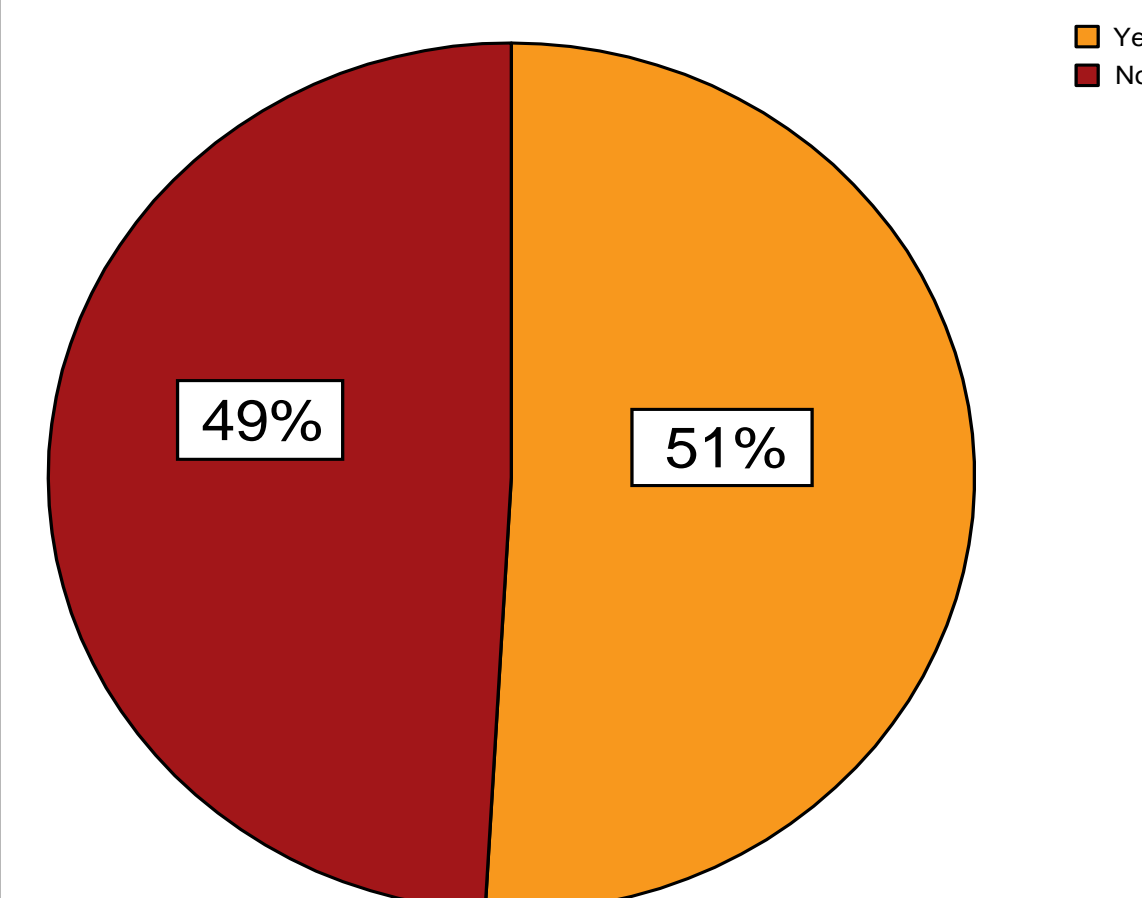
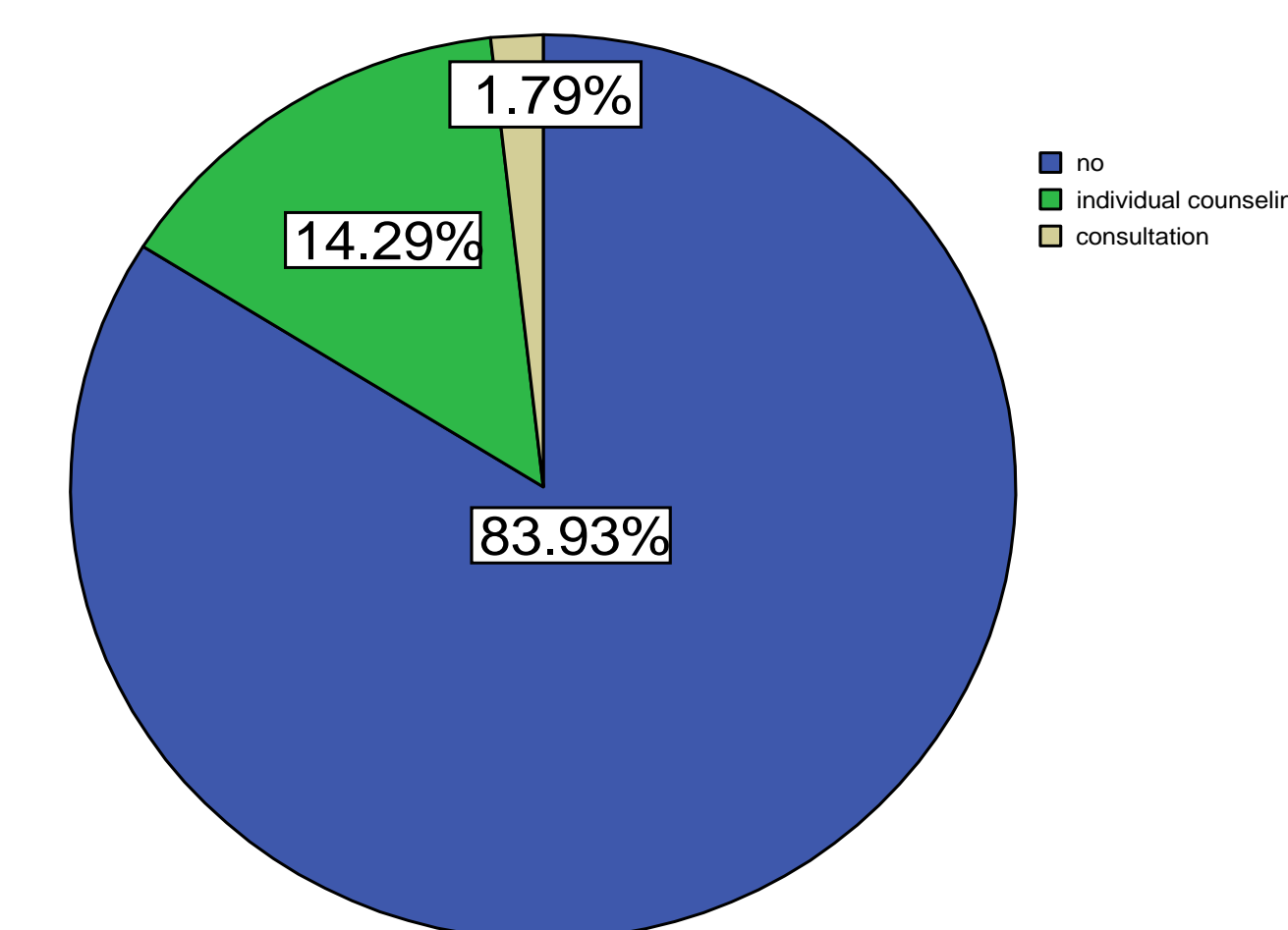


Figure 3:

**Student Parents' Answer to the Questions: "Have you Used The Counseling Center Services? If so, in what capacity?"**



\*\* Figure 3 only includes those students who indicated they were aware of The Counseling Center.

Figure 1. represents the expressed psychosocial needs of student parents in 16 areas. A dichotomous variable was created for each category in order to group students into two categories, those that had expressed a need and those who had not. Data analysis revealed that the largest percentage of student parents felt they needed assistance with stress management(76.4%), feeling burned out (75.5%) and financial concerns(71.8%). The lowest needs were expressed for the categories of choosing a major(17.3%), parenting a special needs child(16.4%) and substance use (10.9%).

Figure 2. represents the number of respondents who reported they were aware of the counseling center. This study indicated that 51% of respondents were aware of The Counseling Center's services.

Figure 3. represents student parents' usage of The Counseling Center. Responses indicated that the majority of students who were aware of The Counseling Center had not used the service (89.93%). Those that had used The Counseling Center had utilized the individual counseling service(14.29%) and consultation(1.79%). Further, none of the respondents had attended a psycho-educational session presented by The Counseling Center. After a categorical grouping of the "no" responses, it was found that 16 respondents did not feel they had a need for counseling services, 20 respondents were not aware of the services, 18 stated the distance from their home to campus was too far and 13 stated they did not have time for counseling. The remaining responses were grouped in the "other" category which ranged from statements such as "Prefer counseling in the community" to "Don't think it will help."

### Conclusions

The Needs Assessment Survey of College Student Parents sought to answer the questions, "Are student parents aware of counseling services, what counseling services do they utilize and what are the psychosocial needs of this population?". This survey indicated that 51% of respondents are aware of the services, the majority do not utilize the service (83.93%) and the most common expressed areas of psychosocial needs are stress management(76.4%) , feeling burned out (75.5%) and financial concerns(71.8%).

A limitation of this study is the lack of a response rate. Statistics regarding the number of students who are parents was unavailable. Therefore, it is uncertain how large of a population of student parents are represented in this study. Secondly, the psychosocial categories were not operationalized, thus each respondent was left to interpret for themselves the definition of each term. Also, findings in this study must not be over generalized to all student parents or student parents on other college campuses.

The first recommendation stemming from this research is that The Counseling Center begins offering, along with the current psycho-educational sessions, a session devoted to student parents that reflects the expressed needs found from this survey.

Future research would include further analysis of the data set gained from the survey. For example, the data could yield the demographics of students who identified the highest need. Once that is determined, further outreach efforts could be made towards those groups. The open response answers could be further evaluated and grouped in order to gain a better understanding of barriers to services.

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