

Aggies ... with children

Students try to balance time for classes, studying and activities with parenting duties

By MELISSA SOROLA-BILANO

The Battalion

Amy Limas faces the same daily struggles as all Aggies: She has to find a parking spot, go to class, study for tests, do homework and work. But Limas' job is different from most other Aggies — she is a mom.

Limas, a junior agriculture business major and the mother of a 5-year-old girl, said her responsibilities are different from the traditional student.

"Going to school and having a child are both full-time jobs that require more strength and determination than anything I have ever done in my life," Limas said.

Limas said she gets mixed reactions when she tells people she is a mother.

"Most of the time when I tell people I have a child, their reaction is 'Wow, I would have never guessed that' or 'Oh, my God, that must be hard!'" Limas said.

"I am very proud of what I am doing with my life and the fact that I have a child. I don't like being treated as though it is something that needs to be discussed behind closed doors."

One of the struggles student parents like Lima face is organizing class schedules around parenting duties. Lima said student parents want to be able to register early because it is difficult to create a schedule to fit her and her daughter's needs.

She said parents should be able to register early like student workers do.

"It makes little sense to me that people with jobs can register early, but mothers who are responsible for another life have to make do with what is available," Limas said. "I think both should be treated equally."

Sarah Graham, a junior speech communication major and mother of a 5-year-old girl, said early registration would help students with children.

"I have never expected anything to be handed to me or expected special privileges because I have a child, but I do think that college students with children is a reality that needs attention," Graham said.

Juggling school and other activities can be hard for students without kids, so when a child is put into the picture, things can get more hectic. Graham admits time management is not something she has conquered, yet she still manages to get good grades.

"I do what I can when I can, and if it doesn't get done, the world won't end," Graham said.

Another concern for parents is child care. Texas A&M's Children's Center is one way the University has acknowledged the need for a facility that benefits students with children.

The Center is open to children of A&M faculty, staff and students.

Di Fontenot, director of the center, said more than 54 percent of those enrolled at the Center are students' children.

Fontenot said funding for the center comes primarily from a monthly tuition paid by the families. The Center offers assistance for qualifying families.

"Every semester we seek funding for those who can't afford the tuition," Fontenot said.

Fontenot said one source of money is a grant funded by the U.S. Department of Education.

The Child Care Access Means Parents In School program (CCAMPIS) was designed to benefit college students by giving them tuition reduction assistance for their child's daycare. CCAMPIS funds also help the center pay for supplies and things like transportation for field trips.

In a 1999 White House press release, then-Vice President Al Gore said the grant will help low-income Americans continue their educations while their children attend a campus-based daycare.

"No parent should have to choose between taking care of their children and furthering their education."

Fontenot said the center has recently become a Child Care Management Services (CCMS) vendor. CCMS is a state program that pays part of the tuition for parents who can not afford child care. The family then pays a co-pay to the Center.

For some parents, joining a school organization has been out of the question. A&M is a huge campus with organizations to satisfy everyone's need. But until lately, students with children have been left out.

A new campus organization, Aggies with Kids, is trying to reach out to students who are parents. Children are always welcome at the meetings so parents do not have to worry about baby sitters.

Risa Bierman, coordinator for the Adult, Graduate and Off-Campus Student Services, said Aggies with Kids is working to become a University-recognized organization. Aggies Plus, an established group at A&M, is designed for nontraditional students.

The University calls them nontraditional students. Parents, graduate students, married students and students older than 25-years fall into this definition.

Marc Barringer, president of Aggies Plus, said the group gives people the chance to meet other students in the same situation. Spouses and children of Aggies Plus members are often included in activities sponsored by the group.

School and family life does not leave a lot of time for parents to socialize or even spend time alone. Alpha Phi Omega (APO), a national co-ed service fraternity, has tried to solve the problem by offering Parents' Night Out.

Sara Allenson, project chairwoman, said she does not see a lot of students' children, but she wants them to know they are welcome to take part in the service.

Children who attend Parents' Night Out are assigned an APO buddy who will look after them for the night. The children are divided into age groups and have the opportunity to play at different centers.

Allenson said past centers have included a dress-up center, a craft table and a puzzle center.

Allenson said she thinks parents appreciate this service. "It has to be useful for them to have a break and enjoy a nice evening out and not worry about the kids," she said.

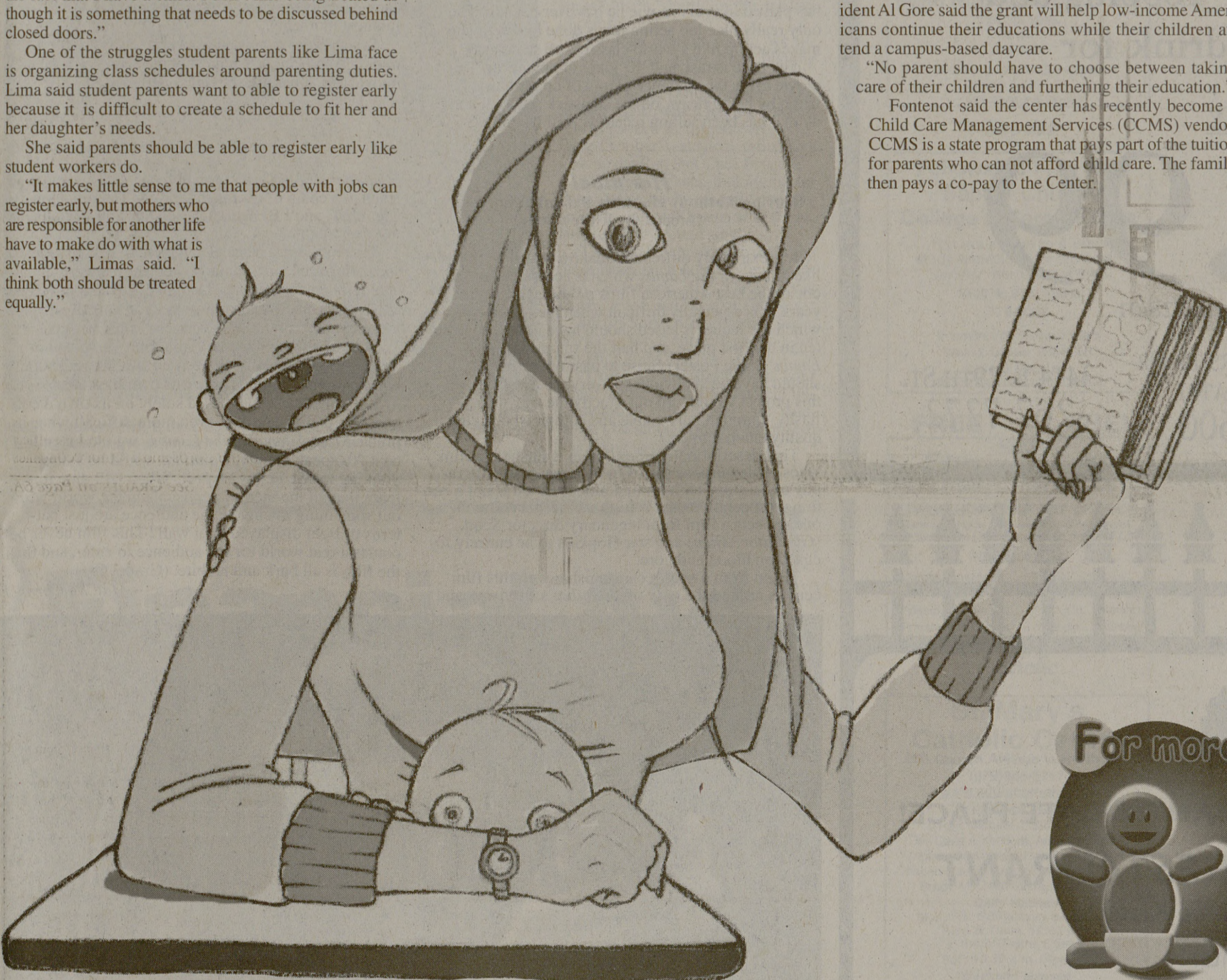
While college is a time of sacrifices for parents and children, most parents feel the experience will be useful to all of them.

Graham said she thinks when her daughter sees her studying and hard work it will benefit her daughter in the future.

"I think that one day she will realize that I'm doing this for her, and it will set an example for her not only to go to college but hopefully to follow her dreams, even if it means taking the longer and harder road," Graham said.

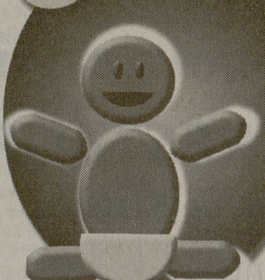
Limas said her daughter already talks about becoming an Aggie.

"When she starts her sentence, 'After I get out of college and become a ...' (then) there is no doubt in my mind that I have instilled something very valuable in her by continuing my education," Limas said.



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For more information about:



- Aggies with Kids
845-1742
- Texas A&M
Children's Center
548-KIDS (5437)
<http://childrens-center.tamu.edu>
- Aggies Plus
AggiesPlus@tamu.edu
<http://aggiesplus.tamu.edu>
- Alpha Phi Omega
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