

## UT moms say resources are insufficient

Despite the University of Texas at Austin's efforts to support pregnant and nursing mothers on campus, many students, faculty and staff find the resources available to them to be inaccessible or insufficient.

Diana Gutierrez, a UT doctoral student focusing on nutritional sciences, had to advocate for herself to find the resources she needed as a pregnant student.

"I had told my adviser, and she said I had no options, and I had basically made the worst mistake of my life," Gutierrez said. "It wasn't well-perceived. And that was kind of challenging because normally you say you are pregnant, and people are happy for you."

[According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research](#), more than one-fifth of undergraduate and graduate students are parents. Kelly Soucy, director of Student Emergency Services, said around 10-15 undergraduate or graduate students per semester seek pregnancy-related absence notes from SES. However, Soucy said the number of pregnant students could be higher because around 1,100 request absence notifications for undisclosed medical reasons every semester.

While some maternity leave is covered by Family and Medical Leave Act, individual colleges and schools create their own policies for those who don't qualify. In the College of Natural Sciences, the previous policy required graduate students to take a leave of absence, meaning their insurance and pay would stop when their employment as a research or teaching assistant stopped, Gutierrez said. The policy changed two years ago to allow students to apply for funding to cover their insurance premiums and stipend during their leave.

One of the biggest challenges for Gutierrez was searching for information and resources. [UT's webpage](#) for graduate parental resources links to accommodation policies for only four colleges or schools. After Gutierrez realized she was one of a handful of UT graduate students who continued school while pregnant, she took on the role of being an adviser.

"Having somebody at the university level who knows what the rules and regulations and benefits are for all the grad students in the whole university would be helpful," Gutierrez said. "After my experience, I have actually helped two friends that have been pregnant (navigate the resources). That's the biggest challenge: making sure you know the resources out there."

Breastfeeding resources at UT are easier to find compared to pregnancy accommodation policies but not always accessible. More than 8 in 10 mothers start breastfeeding their baby at birth, but only 50% continue to the recommended six months of breastfeeding, [according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). The CDC attributes some of the drop-off to lack of support for mothers in their community and at work.

Sara Dube, senior research program coordinator, breastfed while working at UT from November 2018 to June 2019. Dube said UT can do more to support breastfeeding mothers.

“I think they should be very supportive of breastfeeding and provide more flexibility to working moms,” Dube said. “It felt like UT-Austin is a breastfeeding-permissive environment — not supportive.”

While UT does offer Lactation/Quiet Rooms for nursing mothers, Dube said they can be inconvenient because not every building is equipped with a Lactation/Quiet Room, and entrance to the rooms requires coordination with a contact person.

“In my experience using those rooms, even though it is kind of nice that there is even a space, there is always a gatekeeper,” Dube said. “You had to get a code from somebody or get a key. It was like you had to prove you needed the room — as if breastfeeding wasn’t hard enough, but now you are making me jump through a hoop to do it.”

UT also provides students, faculty and staff with the [Child Development Center](#), a childcare center that is located near campus. The center offers a sliding fee scale that charges the user based on income level, making it more affordable for lower-income people, such as students. But the childcare UT offers has a yearslong waiting list.

“It is so hard to get into (UT’s childcare),” said Gutierrez. “I have been on that waiting list for three years; I signed up before I got pregnant. I could not afford childcare if I was a single mom or if I was the main breadwinner in my household. UT daycare is half the price of what I pay right now.”

Making the resources for mothers easier to find would help more student-parents succeed at UT. Gutierrez said supporting pregnant and nursing mothers more would benefit both the university and the advancement of women in science within CNS.

“These things really impact women’s lives, and not having support can really make a difference,” Gutierrez said. “It is hard, and having support from the university would be a very big deal.”