

The Life of Student Parents

Pat Marrujo • College Times
Photos by Adam Moreno



Leah Valenzuela,
hugging her son,
Adrian.

The stereotypical college student is young, carefree and crazy; someone who doesn't care about the past has no understanding the future and lives in the moment.

Responsibilities don't exist. Life is awesome. It's all about you, your classes, your friends and your goals.

It must be nice, but it isn't a realistic stereotype anymore. Anyone can be a student, even a parent.

According to the Institute of Women's College Research (IWCR), there are approximately 3.9 million undergraduate students who are parents, which accounts for just less than a quarter of the 17.9 million undergrads in the US. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy reports that 48 percent of community college students have been or gotten someone pregnant.

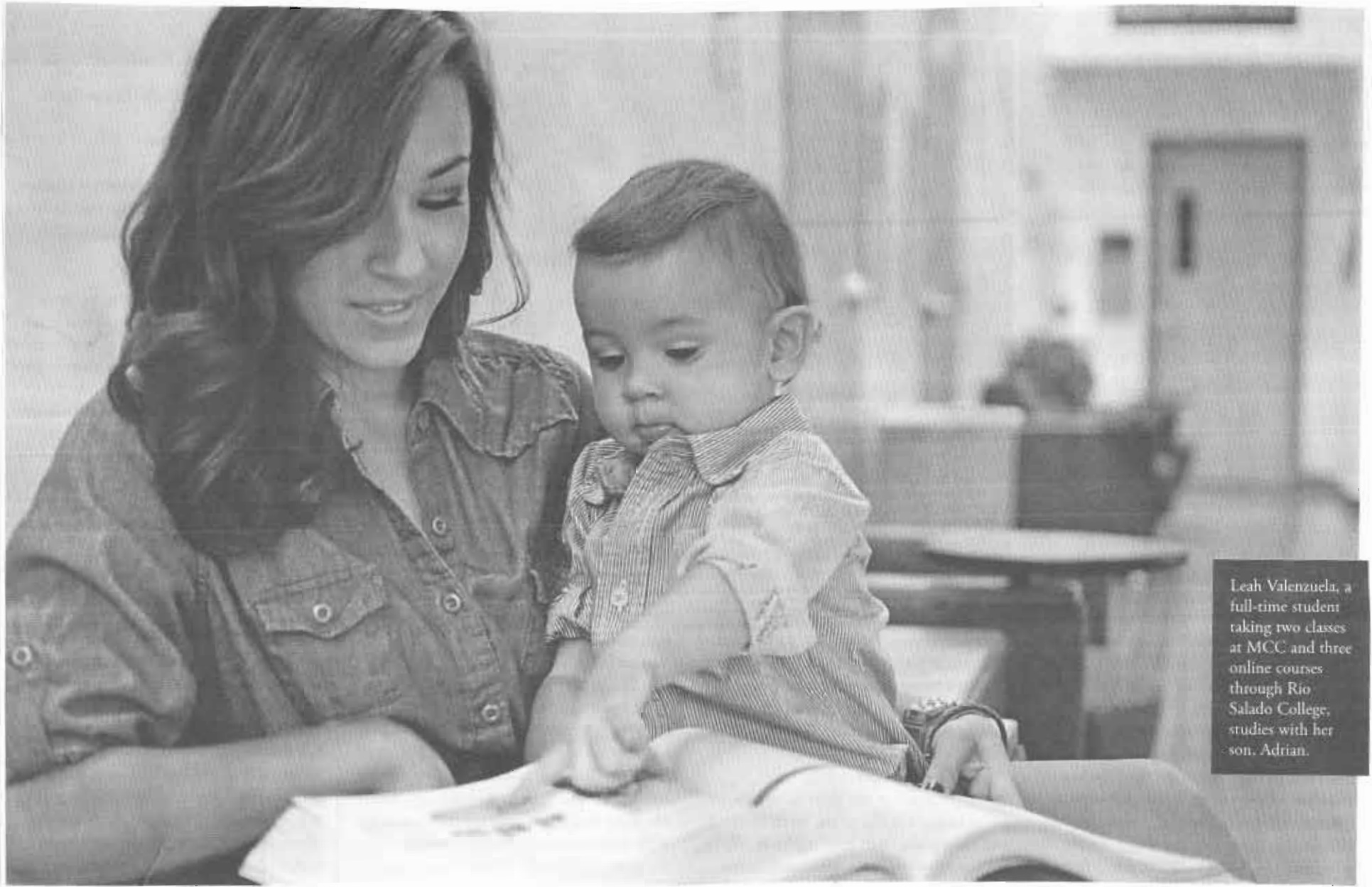
For any college undergrad, balancing homework, a social life and occasionally a job is stressful enough. Now add being responsible for someone else's life. That's a tall task.

Kris Bliss is the supervisor at the Children's Center on the Mesa Community College campus. Most of the children at her facility have parents who attend MCC, so she deals with student parents daily and knows the troubles they encounter in life.

"Student parents have an extra burden compared to more traditional students. Not only do they have to complete the same homework and assignments, they also have to be concerned about their children and care for them," Bliss said. "This can have a huge impact on their ability to complete their educational goals."

While many college students find it tough to balancing their schedule, it is even more difficult for a parent.

"Time is always an issue for student parents, whether it's finding time to complete assignments, guilt for not spending enough time with their children or finding time to work," Bliss said. "It can be very stressful."



Leah Valenzuela, a full-time student taking two classes at MCC and three online courses through Rio Salado College, studies with her son, Adrian.

Even though Bliss sees students with kids on a daily basis, the way they balance their lives never ceases to amaze her.

"Being a parent is one of the most difficult and simultaneously most rewarding jobs in the world, in my opinion," she said. "Going to school particularly full time or in a demanding field such as nursing while raising a small child is no small feat. It is amazingly difficult."

Bliss said that if parents stay on task and organize their time well, they can "retain their sanity." Also, she explained that for a student parent to succeed, he or she must have a goal.

"I think for most of them, they realize that it will only be this way for a short period of time," Bliss said. "They keep the light at the end of the tunnel in the fore. They keep their end goal in mind - the college degree or certificate."

It is no secret that a college degree usually leads to more money and a more successful career, but it also provides a better life for a child.

A CollegeBoard.org poll collected data that a kid aged 3 to 5 in 2007 was twice more likely to perform better in school and have more involved parents if his or her parents held a bachelor's degree than solely graduated from high school.

"For many of these students they are completing their degree to have a better life for themselves or their children and they are also setting excellent examples for their children" Bliss said. "Most of them realize this and are motivated by this alone."

Mesa Community College student Rachel Masser is an example of one such parent.

Mosser can remember the very moment when her now 4-year-old daughter, Kimber, inspired her.

"It was during the first moments of her life that I looked into her sweet innocent eyes and knew that I would do any-

thing in my power to protect and care for her like she deserved," Masser said.

When Kimber was 1 year old, Masser started taking night classes toward her dietetics degree. Kimber's father, Mosser's live-in partner of 10 years, watched their daughter when she was away.

Even with the help of a partner, free time is hard to come by for Masser. However, she manages a strict schedule for balance.

"For me, I want to spend as much time with my daughter as I can," she said. "These are times that I will never be able to get back with her. At the same time, I have other obligations with school,

a home to maintain, and my mental and physical health. I have to have a very tight routine to maintain all of these things, as they are all very important to me."

As a result, Masser explained that being a student parent renders her social life nonexistent.

"The only social times I get are at school with my peers and at the gym with some moms I have become pretty close with," Masser said. "I don't really see them outside of school or the gym, but it is nice to at least socialize a bit about classes and home life."

Masser does not have time to work, so her partner, who is finishing up paramedic school, works as a part-time bartender.

Needless to say, money is tight. "Over the past four years, I have had several mini episodes of overwhelming thoughts about finances and have come very close to getting a job," Masser said. "It gets tiring living on such a strict budget and not being able to buy things that I want or that my family wants. However, after my mini 'breakdowns,' I would always come to the conclusion that money can't buy happiness.

As long as the bills are getting paid, there is food on the table, clothes on our backs, and a means to get to school, the gym, and work, life is actually pretty good. [...] When it comes down to it, spending even one extra minute with my daughter and family is worth more than any possession I could ever own."

Even though things seem tough now, Masser said it will be worth it in the end.

"I think that things are uncomfortable right now, but without being uncomfortable I will not grow," she said. "And although things are tough at times, I really enjoy my life."

In Masser's case, she made the decision to go to college after she already had a child and knew ahead of time that her experience was going to be different from other students.

Leah Valenzuela's road to motherhood is a different story.

Fifteen months ago Valenzuela was, as she described, "at NAU doing the normal college thing." Now, she is living with her parents and raising her 15-month-old son, Adrian.

Valenzuela, a full-time student taking two classes at MCC and three online courses through Rio Salado College, said her mother has been a major source of guidance in her transition to motherhood.

"She has helped me with everything from learning how to wash baby clothes to my school schedule," Valenzuela said. "She is an amazing mom and an even better 'honey' (what Adrian calls her instead of grandma)."

Most 20-year-old college students would have a tough time squeezing a part-time job into their schedule, but Valenzuela is being asked to do much more than that.

"Being a young mom is difficult. I am usually up late every night doing homework and up early with Adrian," she said. "I am [in an] extremely blessed situation where I am able to go to class and

do homework and have my mom watch Adrian. My life is school and Adrian. That is it. I fit in working out when I can but being mom comes first."

That includes her financial decisions and her academic choices.

"Children are expensive no matter how old the parents are," she said. "Right now I have bigger choices to make than most girls my age, but I want to buy him an awesome toy over things for me any day."

Motherhood also had a significant effect on her approach to school.

"The biggest difference in my life now is I am much more driven," she said. "I changed my major from psychology to

high school English, knowing that I needed a definite career before I can pursue my dreams [of] being a psychologist."

Unlike Masser, Valenzuela is no longer in a relationship with her child's father. However, she and Adrian's dad have a "healthy separated relationship."

Valenzuela's college party days are over but that has not stopped her from having a social life.

"Having Adrian has definitely put restraints on my social life; No staying out all night or making poor choices," Valenzuela said. "But luckily I have amazing friends that love my son and choose to hang out with the two of us."

Though a social life is something that Valenzuela has managed to keep intact, she can't say the same about her alone time.

"I have less alone time, actually, I have no alone time," Valenzuela said. "Adrian is always there."

And Valenzuela seems just fine with it.

"Adrian has changed my life in amazing ways. He has made me selfless, patient, more loving and so incredibly silly," Valenzuela said. "I have never laughed as much as I do now."

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- Kris Bliss



Leah Valenzuela, walking through campus with her son, Adrian.