

PARENTAL LEAVE

Policies vary wildly across the profession, but many say the benefit can help attract and retain employees.





When Quincey Malauulu Otuafi was looking for a new job in college admission, the parental leave and family-friendly culture at Westminster College (UT) was a huge draw.

“Westminster has a really great leave policy, especially when compared to other local institutions here in Utah. They offer 12-week full paid leave and they offer it for both parents...It was definitely a big factor in my decision to work at Westminster...I knew I wanted to start a family and this leave was fantastic,” said Otuafi, Westminster’s director of undergraduate admissions.

If approved by a supervisor, her school also offers employees the option to bring their child to work for the first month following parental leave, another perk that drew her to Westminster.

“I feel this constant anxiety about both work and motherhood. You feel like both your identity as a working adult and your identity as a mother, they seem like they shouldn’t co-exist. Institutions like Westminster are really helping that intersectionality exist and normalizing it,” she said.

But many others don’t have the same options.

According to Pew Research Center, the share of moms who are working either full- or part-time in the US has increased over the past 50 years from 51 percent to 72 percent, and almost half of all two-

As Lundien and his husband started the adoption process, Lundien kept his eye out for counseling positions with this benefit.

“At first I didn’t quite get the importance of it. It was a great policy to have and great for mothers and fathers who need that time to be home with their kids, but it never really clicked in until I had been home (caring for a newborn)—and it’s a full-time job,” he said.

“...It was so nice to know that school was left at school and I could concentrate on family. That’s another part of the ‘a-ha!’ moment...There is no way I could be writing letters of recommendation, working on the Common App, and all that other stuff that goes on with our job while I’m trying to change a diaper, feed a baby, and tend to their needs.”

At Worcester State University (MA), where Tiana Carrasquillo is the associate director of admissions, the current parental leave policy allows new parents to take up to 12 weeks of leave. Two of those weeks are paid and the rest is unpaid, leaving many employees cobbling together a patchwork of accrued vacation and sick time to receive pay for portions of their leave.

“Using accrued vacation and sick time is flawed because if you exhaust all of your vacation and sick time, you are left with nothing when you return. This means you can’t take a vacation or be sick—yourself or

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—Tiana Carrasquillo, associate director of admissions, Worcester State University (MA)

parent families now include two full-time working parents. Yet despite these workforce changes, paid parental leave has not followed suit.

Of the 41 nations in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the European Union, the US is the only country that does not mandate any paid leave for new parents. Every other nation requires at least two months of paid leave.

Five states—California, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, and Washington—and the District of Columbia all have state-mandated paid leave plans in place. Starting in 2021, Massachusetts will join these ranks. And as of last December, the US offers the Federal Employee Paid Leave Act, which grants federal employees up to 12 weeks of paid time off for the birth, adoption, or addition of a new foster child.

But paid leave policies in the US are far from the norm. Across the counseling and admission profession, parental leave policies vary wildly.

Rob Lundien, a counselor at Park Hill South High School (MO), was able to take eight weeks of paid adoption leave. His school district offers the same benefit to the primary caregiver of an adopted child as for birth parents.

your child—for the year before or the year after giving birth in order to save your time. Who can work for two years without taking a vacation or being sick? Then there is the question of what to do if you don’t have 10 to 12 weeks of vacation and sick time saved? What if you would like to take more than 12 weeks to bond with your child?” Carrasquillo asked.

“I’ve known one too many mothers that have shared that 12 weeks just wasn’t enough time and that going back to work was very stressful. Parents are forced to go back to work because they can’t go without a paycheck...Unpaid leave sends a message that taking care of an infant isn’t important, valuable work.”

Lundien agrees. As he and his husband look toward the next hurdle—childcare—he is realizing just how quickly his eight weeks of parental leave flew by.

“While eight weeks is generous, it’s almost like it’s not long enough,” he said.

Errol Wint, director of undergraduate admissions at Indiana University—Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), said he notices that most new parents, particularly new mothers, end up taking a lot more time than is included in their paid leave policy.

“What is the message sent by how the policy presents itself, in regards to what you are supposed to be taking, rather than what is available to you? For some of the members of our team, they went ahead and exhausted their PTO. Others have gone into non-pay status, just to ensure they are there and present for their child,” he said.

“It’s worth a conversation about what the appropriate length of time is and what that says about American values and what it means to be involved in the development of your child in those early stages.”

Wint started working at IUPUI in May 2018 and not quite a year later, he found out his wife was expecting. He was “pleasantly surprised to discover that just in 2017, IUPUI updated their policy to include the fathers, to have six weeks of paid parental leave.”

Since Wint hadn’t been working at the school for long and his child was due in the heart of recruitment season, he was worried about taking so much consecutive time off. He credits his boss, Boyd Bradshaw, the associate vice chancellor for enrollment management and chief enrollment officer at IUPUI, with making sure he took the time with his family and left work back at work.

“After taking my paternity leave, I was incredibly appreciative. Having the ability to take that amount of time consecutively off as an

great policies out there and then there are also schools that offer nothing. Where there is a will, there is a way. You have to provide something or you’re not going to be able to retain quality employees. They are going to go to a school that has a better benefits package holistically, be it parental leave or something else.”

Otuafi believes it is a benefit beyond just attracting and retaining employees. She said becoming a mother taught her to manage and prioritize differently and she believes her job performance is stronger now than it was before her parental leave.

“Parental leave is not just about the child. You want to take care of your child but it’s about the person, about the parents. I think that as an employer, there is a lot of value to be gained by giving your employees the time they need for self-care,” she said.

Otuafi was promoted shortly after she came back to Westminster following her parental leave and she credits some of that decision to the mindset she was in after her time with her family.

“In a weird way being on parental leave, having that time, provided a catalyst for that promotion in my career... It was really stressful before I left on leave so that time off, that time with my child, and being able to re-evaluate my priorities was invaluable,” she said.

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—Quincey Malauulu Otuafi, director of undergraduate admissions, Westminster College (UT)

employee of an organization to be there for my family, I’ll never forget that,” Wint said. “It was transformational for me and for my family and I’m incredibly grateful.”

The option of parental leave—or the lack thereof—has a direct impact on employers.

“Employers could potentially be missing out on strong, talented, skilled workers by ignoring the specific needs and wants of women with children,” Carrasquillo said. “. . . It’s important for employers to be upfront about parental leave policies and office culture as early as the interview stage to attract and retain women with children.”

Meghan Waddle, assistant upper school head at The Overlake School (WA), has taken this to heart. As an administrator and new mother herself, she hopes she can push her school to offer better benefits, such as comprehensive parental leave.

“I think we lose people all the time because of a lack of benefits in this industry... If you are seeing that schools that are the same size and scope as you are providing some amazing benefits and you’re not doing that and you can, let’s move the mark on that,” she said.

“I know it depends on where you are in the country, and the strength of your school, and the history of your school, but there are plenty of really

“When I came back from leave, I came with a new mindset. Whatever was happening before I left, was happening back then. I’m going to start with a fresh perspective. I’m going to explore all of the possibilities around me. I think that allowed my office to see a different side of me because I was different. I was re-invigorated. My passion was re-ignited.”

If employers want to reap those benefits, they need to create the right culture for employees.



SUPPORTING NEW PARENTS

Beyond parental leave, there are other factors that need to be considered if the counseling and admission profession wants to support new parents in the workforce and make sure students are still being served.

We asked members what that support would look like in an ideal world.

Quincey Malauulu Otuafi, director of undergraduate admissions at Westminster College (UT), would like to reinvent parental leave as a parental transition period. This would take place for the entire first year after becoming a new parent and would include initial leave, part-time work, and then on-campus child care.

“Helping with child care within that first year would really retain your staff. That would be huge,” she said. “I would never leave! I would have many children!”

Rob Lundien, a counselor at Park Hill South High School (MO), sought out a job that included adoption in its parental leave policy and he wants more employers to factor that in.

“It’s two different sets of challenges. When you have a baby naturally or (by) C-section, there are all kinds of things you have to work through, the recovery time at home is important. Even though we didn’t deliver a baby ourselves, there have been so many other things with adoption,” he said, noting the monthly home visits and court dates that are added on top of the typical baby responsibilities.

Denise Dalton, division chair for student services at Lemont Township High School (IL), said that she wishes new parents could take all of the time they need with their children and not return to work until they are fully ready. But to make that happen she would want “a pipeline of substitutes like we have for teachers.”

“I would want to hire a certified, competent counselor with experience to come in and swoop down like Mary Poppins to take over her caseload while she’s gone and then go away when she’s no longer needed. I would want the counselor to feel supported and loved, but I would want to have that outside experienced help. That is probably the biggest challenge,” Dalton said.

“When you need somebody for six to eight weeks, where are they coming from? It’s easy to find someone who can come in and teach US history for six weeks. It’s a lot harder to get somebody that can handle everything from cutting (to self-harm) to coming back from hospitalization to having special needs to getting into Harvard... In a dream world, we’d have a temp agency of retired counselors or something like that who could pop in and do these things at a moment’s notice.”

—Ashley Dobson

“I know it depends on where you are in the country, and the strength of your school, and the history of your school, but there are plenty of really great policies out there and then there are also schools that offer nothing.”

—Meghan Waddle, assistant upper school head,
The Overlake School (WA)

Denise Dalton, division chair for student services at Lemont Township High School (IL), said she wants to make sure her counselors feel supported and celebrated when they take leave for a new baby.

“Maternity leaves are never fun to cover and yet, ‘Yes! Bring it on!’ How do you ever not celebrate?” she said. “Our training teaches us to be flexible people so as a supervisor of course we’re going to be flexible. We’ll always make it through.”

Wint, who manages 43 people, doesn’t take his responsibility to shape the culture of their office lightly.

“It starts from the top... I’ve had several staff members since [my leave] come and say they want to take paternity/maternity leave and it’s almost a pay-it-forward. That’s the domino effect,” he said.

“Because I received such uncompromising support to take my paternity leave, the requests for leave that have come, I’ve made a point to go out of my way to congratulate them and tell them that we’ll be okay and that they should take full advantage of the benefit.”

Otuafi also found that her position as a leader in the office and as a mother has made her an even bigger proponent of parental leave. She has an even stronger desire to combat any stigma that still exists around taking leave.

“We have to be accepting of these new identities as parents and all the things it entails, just as we would with cultural differences and identity differences. This is a component of diversification in the workplace,” she said.

“It’s a priority for me as I work with my staff. It’s okay to want a family as a young professional. It’s okay to take the time that you need for yourself and for your family.” [📖](#)

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Ashley Dobson formerly served as NACAC’s senior manager of communications, content and social media.