



AUBURN CHILDCARE INFRASTRUCTURE REPORT

2023

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A BRIEF NOTE OF INTRODUCTION

Auburn University's Executive Committee of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) is pleased to present the Auburn Childcare Infrastructure Report. This study highlights a critical topic for Auburn University's faculty and staff: the availability, quality and affordability of childcare in the Auburn-Opelika area. This includes both daycare options for infants, toddlers, and pre-K, as well as summer options for school-age children.

The study confirms that the Auburn community is experiencing an unsustainable childcare crisis, evident not only in the results, but in the overwhelming response. An online survey was distributed to full-time faculty and staff in April 2023, and 1,463 usable surveys were returned. For context, this represents 40% of AU's full-time faculty and 22% of the staff. Nearly 2,000 detailed comments, which often included deeply personal narratives, shed additional light on the deleterious effects that stem from the severe shortage of quality childcare options in the local area.

AAUP adopted a timeless statement on the importance of childcare more than 30 years ago: ***“for faculty members with child-rearing responsibilities to participate successfully in teaching, research, and service to their institution, they must have access to quality child-care facilities. Universities and colleges should assume a share of the responsibility for the provision of such services to their faculties.”*** The Executive Committee is encouraged by the support from President Roberts and his leadership team. We hope this report will serve as a catalyst for engagement with AU's internal and external stakeholders to address this crisis directly and to find collaborative solutions.

We thank everyone who completed the survey. Your insights and constructive feedback are greatly appreciated. The impact of this report is possible because each or you took the time to engage.

Best Regards,

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Problem

The availability, quality, and affordability of childcare options for infants, toddlers, pre-K, and school-aged children continues to plague Auburn University (AU) faculty and staff. While the city and school system are rapidly expanding, the childcare infrastructure in the Auburn-Opelika area has not matched this growth. At the same time, subsidized funding for daycare providers ended September 30, 2023, and future predictions for the industry are dire.

The Study

After years of personal experiences and anecdotal evidence about its deleterious effects, the Auburn chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) met with AU leadership and proposed a study to empirically examine how the inadequate childcare infrastructure in the Auburn-Opelika area is impacting the AU community. With the support of President Roberts and his administration, the Executive Committee of AAUP drafted a comprehensive survey to understand how childcare issues affect faculty and staff attitudes, perceptions, and performance. It was distributed to AU faculty and staff through on-campus listservs in April, and almost 1,500 surveys were returned, with over 2,000 detailed comments.

The Findings

This report analysis includes both descriptive evidence and personal narratives that detail the heavy toll childcare issues are taking on the AU community. The findings point to widespread problems for AU parents who need childcare, regardless of a child's age. For faculty and staff who need daycare services, there are not nearly enough providers in the area - especially for parents with infants. The scarcity and the perceived low quality of care by local providers are causing stress and impacting job performances. For parents with school-aged children, planning for summer childcare is like a scene from *Hunger Games*. The unavailability of full-time summer options causes significant absenteeism for 12-month employees and unmanageable situations for faculty who receive summer support. We find that the insufficient childcare infrastructure is significantly worse in Auburn than in other college communities, and those who have utilized childcare elsewhere are shocked by both the scarcity and quality of childcare. The study uncovered feelings of anger, guilt, exhaustion, and sadness from AU parents. The findings also demonstrate that women who work for AU are being disproportionately impacted.

Next Steps

The members of AAUP's Executive Committee urge President Roberts to convene a Childcare Task Force to formally examine the crisis AU parents continue to experience. Based on best practices at an aspirant institution (i.e., Purdue University), the report outlined shortcomings in AU Human Resources. A task force can explore best practices at other schools and make formal recommendations to AU leadership. A task force can also investigate the viability of other options, particularly as it pertains to an on-campus, full-time childcare facility, more summer alternatives, fundraising opportunities, and partnerships with other relevant stakeholders. Finally, a task force can and should illuminate the hidden - but very real - costs that result from inadequate childcare infrastructure. If sunlight is the best disinfectant, this report should lead to changes that will be valuable for the entire AU community.

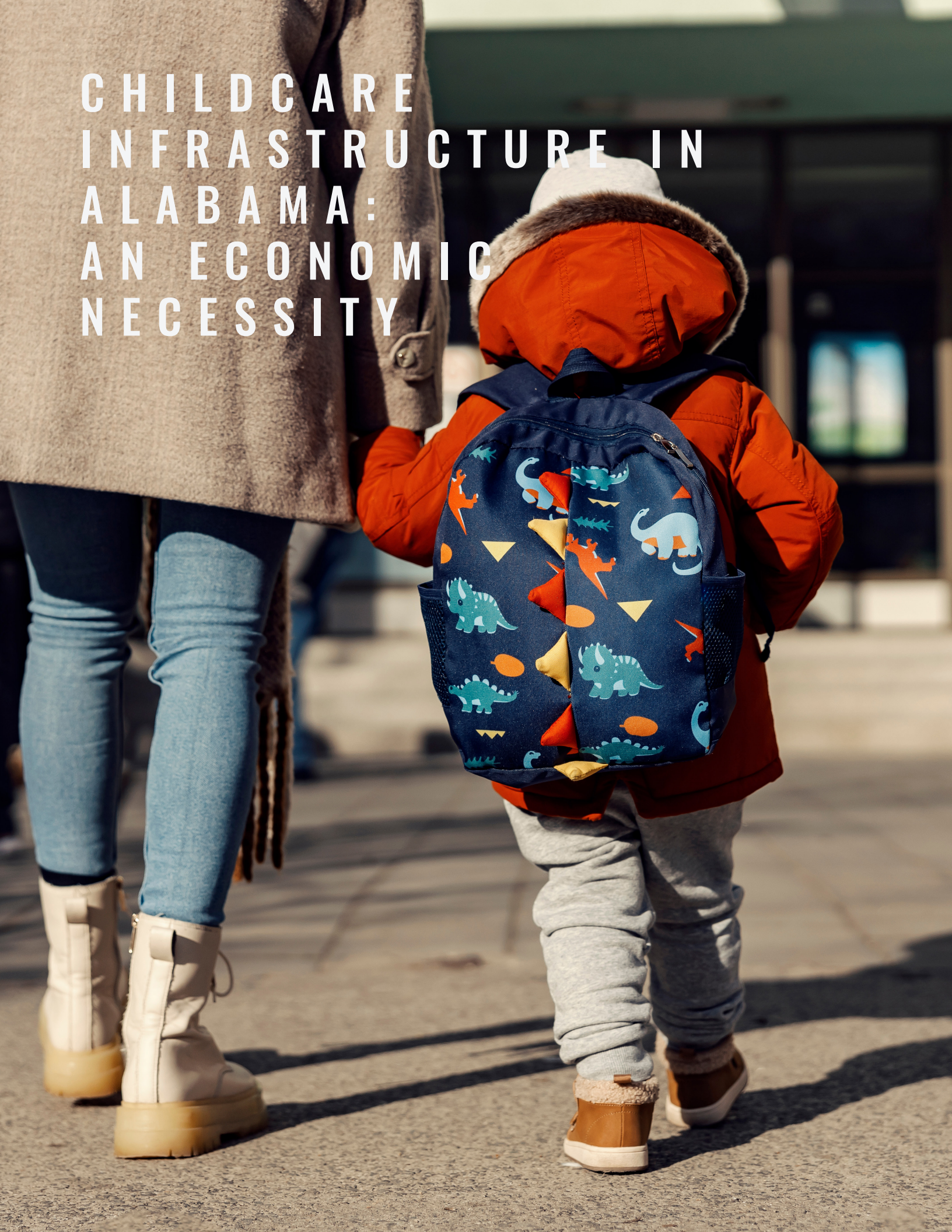
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CHILDCARE
INFRASTRUCTURE IN
ALABAMA:
AN ECONOMIC
NECESSITY



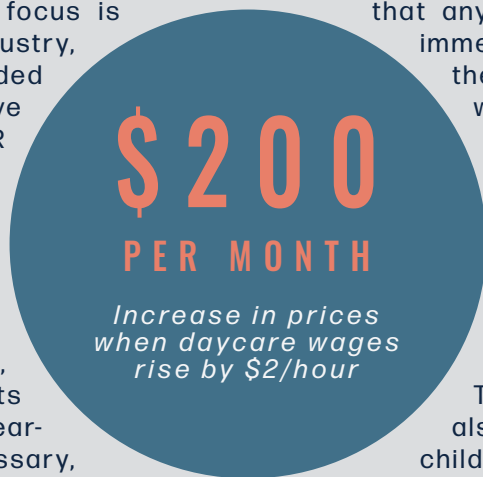
THE PROBLEM WITH MARKET MECHANISMS

A logical criticism of the government's attempt to temporarily assist childcare providers is that it only delayed the inevitable. Government subsidies distort the market pricing mechanism, and beneficiaries get "hooked" on these subsidies. As a result, there may be more childcare providers that go out of business than would have under normal market conditions.

Jessica Brown is an economist with a Ph.D. from Princeton and on the faculty at the Darla Moore College of Business at the University of South Carolina.¹⁰ Her primary research focus is on the childcare industry, and she recently provided a comprehensive explanation to NPR about how the market dynamics operate.¹¹ Daycare providers are heavily regulated, especially in the teacher-child ratio. Alabama, for instance, has a 1:5 ratio for infants and a 1:8 ratio for 2-3 year-olds.¹² While necessary, this regulatory burden disrupts "normal" market mechanisms because daycare providers must hire far more employees than other low-wage industries (e.g., fast food and retailing). According to Dr. Brown, this makes labor costs anywhere from 70-80% of a provider's total costs, which has a drastic effect on prices. For instance, increasing wages \$2/hour for fast food employees may lead to food prices increasing by a few cents, while increasing wages for daycare employees by the same amount could raise prices \$200/month for families.

A market-based approach calls for raising childcare prices to cover the cost of higher wages in this competitive labor market. It would dampen demand

for childcare services, thereby reducing the months-long waitlists that cause parents great anxiety. This approach actually creates two additional issues. First, people in lower-wage industries who need childcare could no longer afford it, which could lead to severe staffing shortages. Second, a market-based approach does not completely solve the childcare providers' woes. For most providers, especially smaller ones, profit margins are razor thin. Any open vacancy must be filled immediately to generate the revenue necessary to cover the labor costs. Waitlists mean that any vacancy can be filled immediately, and without them, childcare prices would necessarily climb even higher to offset the costs of vacancies. This is especially the case for infants because of the low teacher-child ratios, which explains the long waitlists for new babies. The heavy cost burden also explains why some childcare providers have stopped providing infant care altogether.



Our study of the local childcare infrastructure reflects these same market dynamics. In the pages ahead, our survey analysis offers insights about the ways that AU faculty and staff are dealing with limited childcare availability, concerns about quality, and the stress of rising prices. AU leadership should consider how an increase in childcare costs and even fewer options may affect its workforce, especially women. Our study reveals a staggering number of women with children have considered moving or resigning because of the *current* childcare situation. The potential for more family upheaval and stress cannot be understated.

ABOUT THE STUDY

On February 23, 2023, the Auburn AAUP Executive Committee met with President Roberts and his administration to discuss major concerns about the childcare situation in the Auburn-Opelika area and its adverse effects on faculty, particularly junior faculty and women with infants, toddlers, and school-aged children. During this meeting, the AAUP Executive Committee proposed to systematically study this issue on campus by conducting a comprehensive survey.

After the meeting, we decided to expand our target population to include all full-time AU employees. We had several research objectives in mind during the survey development process:

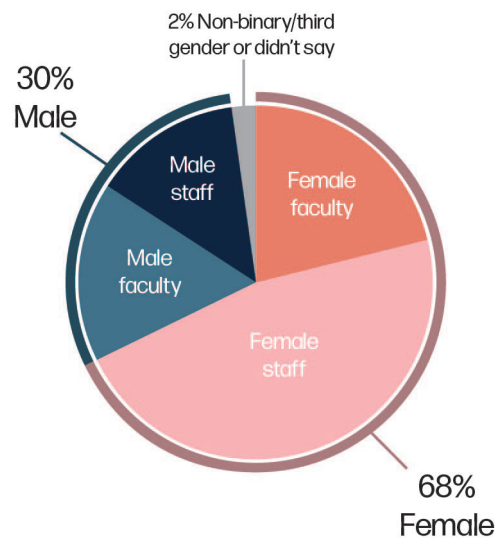
- To what extent is the campus community impacted by the availability, quality, and cost of the local childcare options?
- How severe is the shortage of childcare options, and is there sufficient demand for additional childcare centers and summer camps?
- What are the effects of the childcare situation on work- and family-related behaviors?
- What perceptions do faculty and staff hold about how much support their departments and AU leadership provides to parents?

A draft of the survey was presented to President Roberts' administration during a meeting on April 6, 2023 for informational purposes, although the survey's development and data analysis were solely overseen and completed by the AAUP Executive Committee. The survey was distributed in April 2023 to faculty via the Auburn University Faculty Senate Listserv and an email sent to department chairs and heads. It was distributed to full-time staff via the A&P Assembly and Staff Council listservs.

STUDY CHARACTERISTICS

Data collection extended from April 17 to May 12, 2023, and 1,463 full-time employees responded to the survey. Two-thirds of them joined AU within the last 10 years. All colleges on campus were represented, with the biggest response rates coming from Liberal Arts (14.1%), Veterinary Medicine (9%), and Engineering (8.2%).

The gender demographics of the survey results are outlined in the graph below,¹³ showing an additional breakdown between staff and faculty. We want to specifically highlight that **52% of full-time female AU faculty members responded to the survey.**



Most survey questions focused on AU faculty and staff with children or dependents, which represents 73% of the overall sample (n=1,067). The table on the next page shows the number of respondents with at least one child in specific categories that range from "Currently Pregnant" to "Grown Children Living Out of the House." Families with children across all age ranges were well-represented. The survey also revealed that 116 of faculty and staff respondents have children with disabilities.

	One child in this age category	Two or more children in this age category
Currently pregnant	67	17
Under age 1	96	5
1-2 years old	191	16
Preschool age (3-5; not currently enrolled in kindergarten)	223	21
Kindergarten through second grade	224	36
Third through fifth grade	197	37
Sixth through eighth grade	139	33
High school	142	42
Grown children living in the home full time	78	16
Grown children living out of the house	107	106

We asked parents if they had family who lived close by enough to assist them with childcare emergencies like illness, school closures, and holidays. This question revealed that **most parents do not have a local family support system to provide help.** There were 835 respondents who would benefit from family in the area, but only 15% of the faculty and 30% of the staff have that option available to them.

The survey also captures additional information about the number of faculty and staff who are in different stages of the family lifecycle:

- 296 have children currently enrolled in daycare.
- 262 have had children enrolled in local daycare within the last 5 years, and of those, 64 babies were born premature.
- 470 anticipate the need for daycare in the future.
- 62 are currently pregnant or have a spouse/partner who is pregnant.
- 155 have had children enrolled in daycare in both Auburn/Opelika and another location outside the local area.
- 581 have at least one school-aged child, and of those, 478 need some kind of summer childcare support.

WOMEN TAKE THE HARDEST HIT

The overwhelming response by women led us to believe that they are more likely impacted by childcare infrastructure issues. The data appear to confirm it. As one respondent stated clearly, *"I work with faculty from across the university in my role and have done research on the impact of lack of access to childcare on the professional development of faculty. It is a gender issue with women shouldering the brunt of the work"* (emphasis added).

We looked at how many parents had spouses or partners who did not work outside the home. This level of additional

flexibility within the home can be helpful when there are unexpected school closures or other childcare disruptions. It is worth emphasizing that male faculty are particularly advantaged, while female staff - who tend to have the least flexible schedules - are most disadvantaged. By comparison, as shown in the graph on the next page, men are three times more likely than women to have a spouse or partner who does not work outside the home.

Men are **3 TIMES MORE LIKELY** than women to have a spouse or partner who does not work outside the home.

We also looked at how the division of labor for childcare responsibilities was distributed between spouses/partners. The chart on the following page shows that

AU PARENTS WITH PARTNERS/ SPOUSES WHO DON'T WORK OUTSIDE THE HOME



6%

Female employees

9%

Female faculty

5%

Female university staff



22%

Male employees

27%

Male faculty

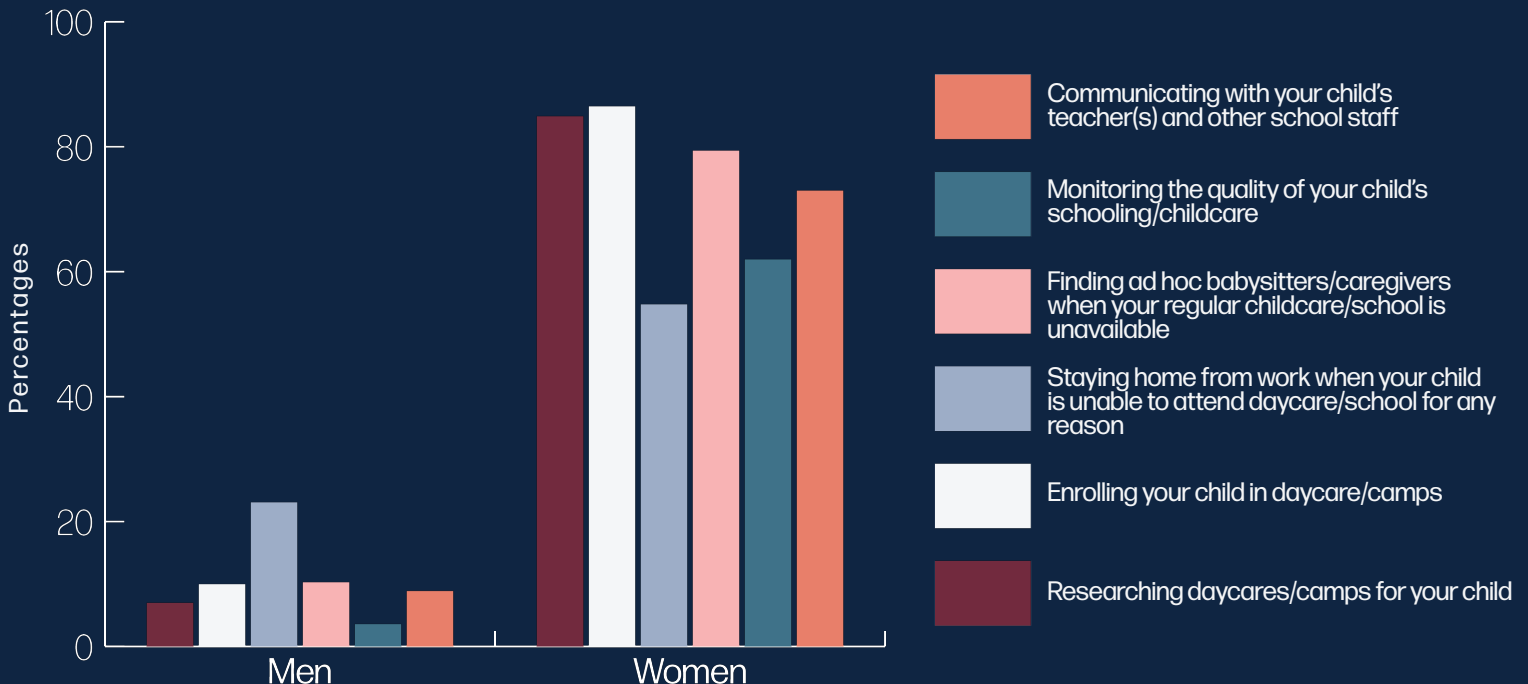
15%

Male university staff

women perceived that they took most of the responsibility for researching childcare options, enrolling their children in daycare and summer camps, and finding sitters when childcare is unavailable. Alternately, men were quite unlikely to endorse that they took primary responsibility for the same activities. The survey comments underscore that these are the very responsibilities that create the most stress and anxiety for parents, and this question indicates that, again, women are most affected.

In the following sections, we present an analysis of the survey. We want to emphasize that the negative aspects and comments were not cherry-picked. Out of the 2,000 comments that were provided, we could put the positive ones on one page. For that reason, we structured the report to focus on two main areas that reflect the childcare infrastructure crisis: full-time daycare for children ages 0-5, and summer care options for school-age children. We include information derived by the survey questions as well as the open-ended comments from AU parents. Because the status-quo leads to negative outcomes for the parents and the university, we close with several considerations that we hope AU leadership and our relevant stakeholders will consider.

RESPONDENTS WHO ANSWERED "MOSTLY ME"



“I work with faculty from across the university in my role and have done research on the impact of lack of access to childcare on the professional development of faculty. It is a **gender issue** with women shouldering the brunt of the work.”



DAYCARE: HURRY UP AND WAIT

The survey uncovered an untenable situation for the nearly 300 respondents who currently need full-time daycare for their children. The shortage has hit crisis-level. Waitlists to place children in local daycare facilities are months, and sometimes years, long. Because of the high labor costs, there have been daycares that closed their doors to infants altogether. The word “stress” was used over and over in the comments because of the lack of quality options. One mother said that *“Daycare stress has been **excruciating**”* (emphasis added).

Daycare options are also limited for AU faculty and staff because of restricted hours. Several daycare providers offer programs that do not cover the workday. One example is the Early Learning Center, Auburn’s only on-campus facility staffed by Auburn employees. Run by the College of Human Sciences, this facility serves children ages 2-5 in half-day sessions: 8:30-11:30 and 12:30-3:30. Three and four-year-olds can attend both morning and afternoon sessions. but

childcare is not provided during the lunch break between sessions. These limited hours exclude nearly all AU employees. One frustrated parent expressed, *“I also thought the AU Early Learning Center was a joke regarding its offerings– basically it’s not an option due to its extremely limited hours of operation. I’m guessing it’s nice for stay-at-home moms as wives to a full-time partner working at the university as a ‘moms day out’ option, but that’s all it seems to serve.”*

The stories from parents about the stress and fear of not getting their children a “spot” were difficult to read. This includes fear of job loss. One parent stated, *“We needed childcare and weren’t able to find anything until 1 week before I was supposed to return to work. Lack of childcare options in the area almost cost me my job.”* Several parents revealed that the lack of options put their spouse’s/partner’s job at risk, with one saying that her husband was out of work for 17 months while waiting for an opening.

“Lack of childcare options in the area almost cost me my job.”

PREGNANT WHILE STANDING (IN LINE)

Given the urgency for faculty and staff who are pregnant or have a spouse/partner who is pregnant, we asked this group of faculty and staff (n=62) whether they had been able to secure a “spot” in a full-time program for the infant they are expecting. Only 10 reported that they had secured a spot for their infant, 11 reported that they do not need full-time daycare, and 27 (44%) were left hanging in the balance. To put that in perspective, that is **more than 5 full-time classes of infants** with the 1:5 state-mandated ratio.

Expecting parents who need daycare must put their names on every local waitlist and pray that they get the call that a spot has come available before they must return to work after the baby is born. *“I am currently on about 7 waitlists but won’t know until closer to the time my child will need daycare in August, if I have a spot,”* reported one expectant mother. The wait is agonizing, especially when expecting parents apply

early and won’t get any information until after the baby is born. One respondent explained, *“I am due in November and am on the wait list for every daycare in Auburn, however, have been told likely won’t get in until Fall 2024 at the very earliest.”*

The financial burden can also be heavy, before daycare is even needed. We learned that if parents are lucky enough to secure a spot before the baby is born or during maternity leave, they must take the spot when offered or they will find themselves on the bottom of the waitlist again. *“I joined the waitlist in January in preparation for needing the spot the following January. If I make it through the waitlist and don’t need it yet, I will have to pay to maintain my spot or risk waiting another year,”* reported one expecting parent. In other words, the lack of availability forces parents to pay hundreds or even thousands of dollars to daycare providers **before** they need the service.

EXTRA PRESSURE WITH PREEMIES

As difficult as it is for expecting parents, extra stress and anxiety come from having a baby born prematurely. Of the 555 parents who have ever had children enrolled in full-time daycare in the Auburn-Opelika area, 64 respondents indicated that they had a child born premature. A third of these parents reported experiencing difficulties enrolling in daycare before their child was born earlier than expected.

Because there is no additional support for this situation, the stress over finding a daycare provider, the anxiety of missing extra work, and the guilt for going back to work were palpable in the comments. These feelings were even more pronounced prior to the university offering six weeks of paid paternity leave. A significant issue was parents returning to work when they felt like their preemies were not strong enough to be in a daycare setting. Another was when much of the leave time was spent in the hospital, leaving very little time to bond with the infant. One mother expressed that, **“If**

you spend 7 weeks in the hospital before you can even take your child home, you only have 5 weeks at home with them (vs. 12), which is incredibly challenging.”

Although there were several comments about having supportive supervisors and colleagues, there were also some shocking comments about what happened to parents with preemies. One mother commented that because her baby came a month early, she had to return to work and finish out the semester **“because we do not have a substitute system.”** Another female faculty member expressed that she *“was still expected to give and grade final exams and calculate semester averages while recovering from C-section and caring for premature newborns.”* Even a male faculty member with a newborn in the hospital said that he feared punishment if he did not submit grant proposals. He said, *“That meant working at all hours of the night while trying to support my spouse and our premature newborn.”*

THE WAIT IS OVER, BUT NOT THE STRESS

Parents learn that the stress does not end when they get a coveted spot in a daycare facility. The relief quickly subsides when other pressing issues arise. The survey analysis brought many of these concerns to the surface. They stem largely from the cost and the quality of their children's care, but the anxiety results in its own set of consequences.

COST INCREASES > PAY INCREASES

We were able to acquire 2019-2023 data for the weekly cost of one of the local daycare providers. Out-of-pocket costs to parents for one child in this facility have increased over 20% the last four years. The average annual cost for enrollment at this facility is \$12k. At the same time, the vacation policy has been altered, language immersion is now an extra fee, and there is no longer a sibling discount. According to a report by the Alabama Department of Health, 2021 weekly tuition rates at this facility were 33% higher than the average tuition rate in Lee County.¹⁵

AU faculty and staff who need daycare are getting hit from all sides. Along with

substantive daycare cost increases, they were also hit with a 15% increase in the AU health insurance plan for families in 2023. As one parent commented, *"I basically work to pay for childcare and health insurance with the cost of both now."* Just to pile on even more, the rising inflation rates have made everything else more expensive as well. Another comment reflected this reality: *"The pricing of daycare is increasing with inflation; however, the pay rate at Auburn has not."* Even with the generous 6% merit raise pool offered by the university in fiscal year 2023, the raise did not offset the higher costs.

We also reflected on a comment by one faculty member: *"It costs more to send our children to daycare than it would to enroll them as freshmen at Auburn University."* That was hard to believe at first glance, but the facts support this statement. The university subsidizes tuition for AU employees by offering a generous 50% discount. That brings the cost of tuition and fees to just over \$7k.¹⁶ With the required Orange meal plan,¹⁷ the cost is just over \$10K for the academic year.

“IT COSTS MORE TO SEND OUR CHILDREN TO DAYCARE THAN IT WOULD TO ENROLL THEM AS FRESHMAN AT AUBURN UNIVERSITY.”



COST ≠ QUALITY

As the saying goes, “you get what you pay for,” which indicates a relationship between cost and quality. However, this is not the case for the 296 respondents who currently have children enrolled in daycare. We asked them to rate their satisfaction with the quality of their child’s daycare. Only 5% of respondents stated they were extremely satisfied with the daycare center they were currently using. We asked the same to parents who had ever used the local daycare (n=262), and there was no difference - only 5% were extremely satisfied.

Because of the market dynamics, daycare owners face constant staff turnover because of the meager pay they can offer their employees. It makes managing the business extremely challenging, and this has a significant impact on the parents’ perception of quality that their children receive.

One parent expressed, “My son’s daycare has changed teachers in his daycare room more times than I have been able to keep track of since the beginning of the school year.” In explaining the low satisfaction score, another respondent commented that it stemmed from “*lack of quality teachers, consistent turnover, and general lack of engagement with parents.*”

The concerns about quality are not isolated to one provider, but rather seem to be a systemic issue. As one mother explained, “*We have had SO many issues with the daycares in town. We started at one school and left because we truly did not feel comfortable with the quality of*

care our children were getting. Our current school is better, but still not an ideal scenario.” Other issues that were brought to light include an insufficient curriculum, staff without expertise in childcare, low food quality, and concerns about child safety.

One of the survey questions asked the respondents if any of their dependents had disabilities. We found that 11% of the 1,067 respondents fall into this category. We did not assess the age of these children, but the comments suggest that several children are currently in daycare.

The comments we heard from these parents almost exclusively involve the lack of training on how to address these children’s needs. One parent expressed that, “*Teachers do not have any background in child education; they don’t know how to handle kids that present ‘behaviors’ different from what they consider ‘normal.’*” Another parent explained how her disabled son was in a bouncer of crib for too long.

She even noted that, “*They thought they were being safe, but it was actually unfair treatment.*”

“IT IS A LITERAL PIT IN MY STOMACH EVERYDAY THAT I AM WORKING HERE AT AUBURN THAT MY CHILDREN ARE NOT IN BETTER HANDS.”

HIGH COST + LOW QUALITY = EMOTIONAL TURMOIL

We saw something more than just stress in the comments: a deep sense of frustration and at times a righteous dose of anger. There was also sometimes a sense of sadness - of resignation - that leapt off the page. One mother reflected that, “*It’s sad because you don’t want to leave your child with just anyone or anywhere, but*

you have to also work to survive and a decision has to be made.” Parents seem to feel trapped because of the lack of quality options, as one respondent said simply, “In this area, you feel sort of ‘stuck’ with whatever you can find.”

There is a natural spillover effect when parents feel this way: they bring it to work with them. One respondent noted excitement about getting a position at AU, but then followed up with, *“The daycare options and availability are abysmal. It has affected my well-being because I worry if my child is safe and taken care of when I’m*

GIVE MORE, PAY MORE

While the cost of daycare was a real concern for some respondents, we also wanted to know whether parents currently utilizing full-time daycare would be willing to pay a premium for either convenience or quality. The proxy used for quality is a daycare with the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation. Providers with this designation have met NAEYC’s 10 standards for ensuring high quality early childhood education. Accreditation also requires lower ratios than state requirements (e.g., 1:4 ratio for infants and a 1:6 ratio for 2-3 year-olds).¹⁸ Currently, the Early Learning Center (ELC) operated by the College of Human Sciences is the only NAEYC-accredited program in the Auburn-Opelika area, although it is not a full-time program.

First, we asked respondents whether they would be willing to pay more for a NAEYC Certified daycare center. The majority indicated that they were not familiar with this accreditation, but 31.8% said yes, and only 7.3% said no. Among faculty, only 1% said no. This suggests that among those who are knowledgeable about NAEYC accreditation, there is an appetite for paying higher tuition to have access to higher quality daycare centers. One respondent noted that, *“Parents are willing to pay for quality care. I changed to a facility that I do feel provides the quality of care needed and am paying more for it. I have no regrets.”* Another comment also highlighted the

at work.” After praising a wonderful partner who shares parental responsibilities, another respondent noted that, *“the multiple layers of childcare and lack of quality care has negatively impacted both of our jobs.”* A more specific example is how the stress and anxiety *“impacts my workday and limits my tolerance for normal work issues when I’m struggling to make sure my kid is properly cared for.”*

61% AGREED

they would be willing to pay more than local tuition rates for *higher quality* daycare than is currently available

desire for higher quality daycare options: *“Most of the people that we talk to say that they would rather pay double the tuition and have a well-trained instructor. Most of these are faculty that move to Auburn from other areas of the country where daycare cost is much higher.”*

The survey included three other related questions about interest in a full-time, on-campus daycare center. We asked these to respondents who currently have children enrolled in daycare and those who anticipated needing daycare in the future (n=755). The responses were as follows:

- 85% agreed that they would enroll their child if the cost was comparable to other local providers.
- 47% agreed that they would be willing to pay more than local tuition rates for *the convenience*.
- 61% agreed that they would be willing to pay more than local tuition rates for *higher quality* than is currently available.
- In comparing faculty and staff responses, there is a statistically significant difference between them: 43% of faculty vs. 26% of staff *strongly agree*.

There is immense interest in a full-time program exclusively for faculty and staff. One female faculty member underscored this sentiment: *“Having a quality childcare facility on campus would be absolutely invaluable. It is something that all of my*

female colleagues discuss on a fairly often basis. I love the Early Learning Center's design and curriculum; however, it is not feasible for me because it is not all working day. I would love something of that quality that accommodates university employee working hours."

Another mother said that an on-campus full day program would **"transform the lives of faculty with young children."**

Several respondents also indicated that their previous institution had a full-time on-campus daycare. For instance, one commented, *"I had access to on-campus daycare. I CANNOT overstate what a benefit this was... It is the thing I have missed most since moving here."*

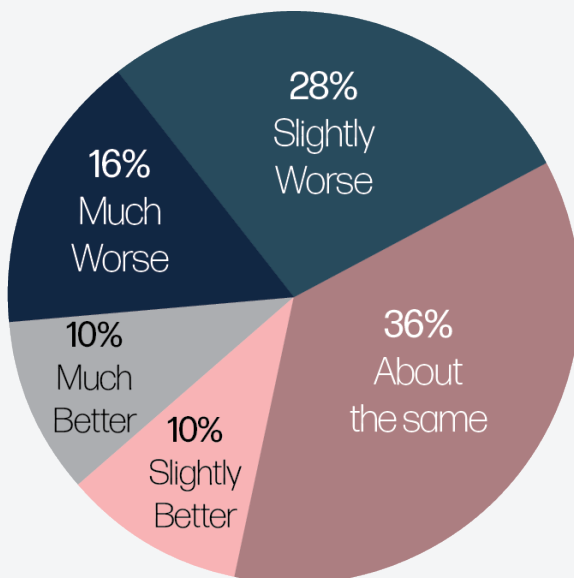
BETTER DAYS BEHIND

One goal of the study was to compare the extent of the childcare issue in Auburn to other places. To do this, we got feedback from parents who have experienced both: they have had children enrolled in a local daycare and in a daycare outside of the Auburn-Opelika area (n=155). As the chart below illustrates, a substantial portion of respondents (44%) said the local quality is worse, while the local cost is either equivalent or higher than the previous location (74%).

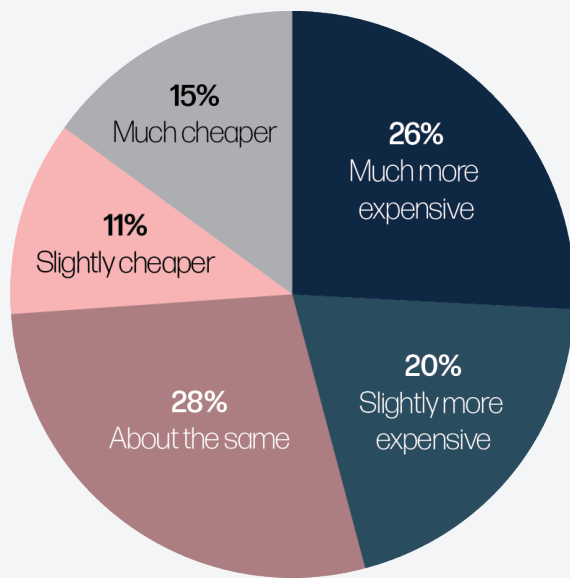
the infant ratios, saying, *"I was surprised to see the drastic difference in ratios when we moved to Auburn."* Another commented about the quality of daycare in Auburn by comparison: ***"If anyone has experienced childcare centers in other places that offered a higher quality, they will know better and the shock value is drastic"***. Along those lines, another respondent contrasted the Auburn public schools as *"amazing,"* but alternately, *"it was shocking to see the poor quality of childcare centers."* Another parent commented grimly that, *"Auburn is not a good place if you have a preschooler."*

18

QUALITY OF LOCAL DAYCARE COMPARED TO THOSE OUTSIDE AUBURN/OPELIKA



COST OF LOCAL DAYCARE COMPARED TO THOSE OUTSIDE AUBURN/OPELIKA



DAYCARE INFRASTRUCTURE: AN INSURMOUNTABLE CHALLENGE?

Given the anecdotal evidence we had about the lack of daycare infrastructure, another goal of the study was to examine the extent of the impact. In other words, do AU faculty and staff perceive the problem is insurmountable enough to alter their future family planning decisions? As the graphic below indicates, 66% say yes. The comments associated with this question - nearly 300 of them - provided more nuanced insight about how and why these decisions have been altered.

The majority of the comments suggested that having more children is no longer an option. Availability was most cited as the reason. One respondent offered, *"We do not want to go ahead and bring another child into the world, when we are already struggling to find childcare for the one child we currently do have, even though we are personally ready to have more children."* Regrettably, we learned that the availability of daycare also affects foster parents: *"We are foster parents and can only accept children who are in school. We had originally preferred fostering newborns; however, the lack of available childcare caused us to change our minds."*

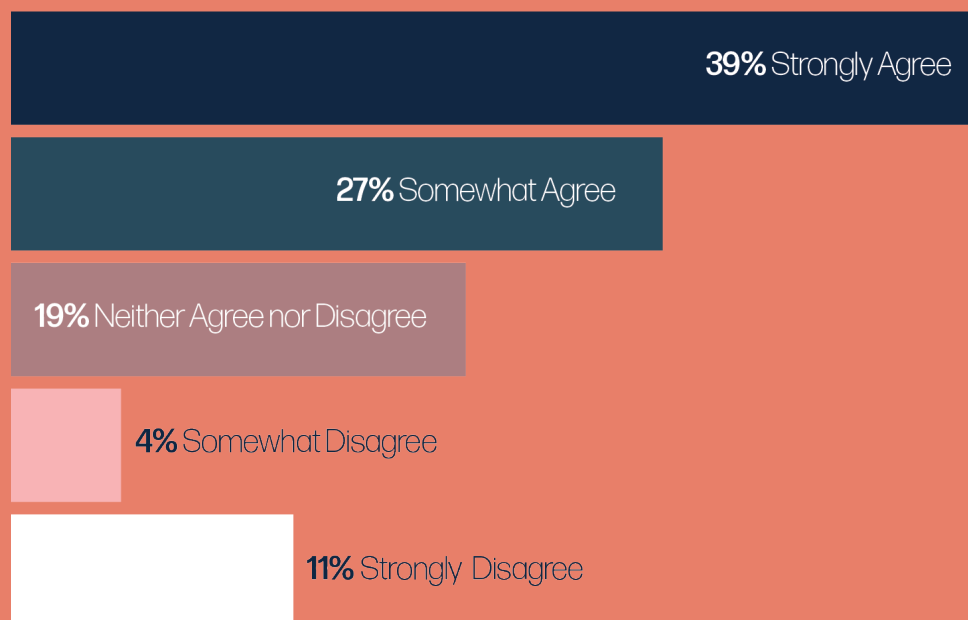
Cost and quality of daycare are also drivers for the decision to stop having children. As one parent noted, *"I just want to emphasize that the current cost of daycare is causing parents to avoid having second or third children, despite a strong desire to do so."* In terms of the quality of

the local daycare providers, another respondent commented, *"A meaningful reason my spouse and I are considering not having additional children is our displeasure with the quality of childcare in the Auburn community and the challenges that presents to our family."*

The analysis also revealed another noteworthy impact of the shortage of infant care. Some parents who do intend to have more children are timing it to get "sibling priority" status. When a child is currently enrolled in a daycare facility, parents move to the front of the line when another child arrives - as long as the first child hasn't aged out. After one mother did not have daycare for her first child until 14 months of age, she timed the second birth to take advantage of the sibling priority policy. She added, *"This means the financial burden of two children in full time daycare for a limited time to ensure an infant slot."* Another mother noted that in addition to the sibling priority, her daycare facility also provided a discount if more than one child is enrolled simultaneously.

Overall, the daycare picture is bleak. The infrastructure has been stretched to the point that parents are scrambling to find availability and then find themselves unhappy with the quality of care that their children receive. As the next section will reveal, the search for summer camps brings stress and anxiety to an entirely new level.

**SURVEY
RESPONDENTS
CONSIDER:
"AVAILABILITY
OF CHILDCARE
HAS IMPACTED
MY FAMILY
PLANNING
DECISIONS"**



HUNGER GAMES: SUMMER CAMP EDITION



20

For those who have seen the movie or read the books, and have had the Auburn summer camp experience, *Hunger Games* is a fitting description. It was used several times in the survey comments. Other names that were mentioned to describe the Auburn summer camp experience include *Mad Max Hellscape* and *Mom's Death March*. There were several other descriptors as well: extreme sport, abysmal, awful, nightmare, absolutely dreadful, terrible, woefully inadequate. One parent said summer childcare is *"like the land-grab for an AU/AL football game."*

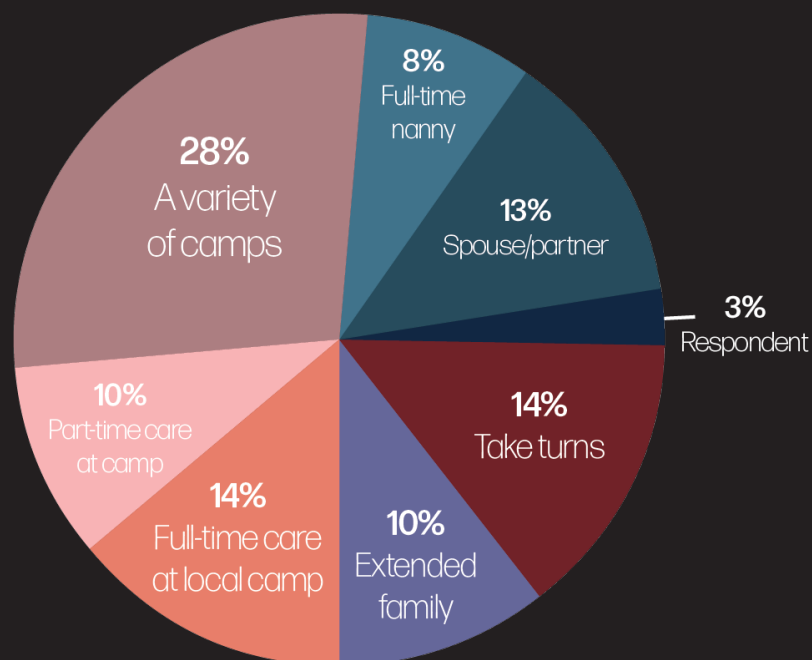
Of the 447 respondents who need summer care, almost 30% plan to use a variety of camps. This isn't by preference, but because it's what's available to parents locally.

**AS OF
APRIL 2023:
OVER 40% OF THOSE WHO NEEDED
SUMMER DAYCARE HAD NOT FINALIZED
THEIR PLANS**

The analysis revealed that 581 respondents had at least one school-age child, and 80% of them need summer childcare. To put this in context, the survey was distributed about one month before the end of the school year. **Over 40% (n=200) of those who needed summer daycare had not finalized their plans yet**, and this was not for lack of trying. When asked about the plans that were in place or those that would hopefully be confirmed soon, the graph below shows various possibilities.

Over 450 open-ended comments were provided about this issue, and there were three dominant themes in them. Over 60% of the respondents discussed the lack of summer childcare options for school-aged children, particularly the scarcity of full-time care. Almost half of the respondents mentioned cost as an issue. The third issue that came up repeatedly was related to the need for flexible hours during the summer, and this was a crucial issue for the staff who are required to be on campus from 7:45am-4:45pm.

AU PARENTS IN NEED OF SUMMER CHILDCARE



THE SUMMER SCRAMBLE

The results of the survey revealed that the overwhelming majority of faculty and staff with school-age children *dread* summer. The childcare crisis is perhaps even more dire for this subset of parents because there are simply nowhere close to enough summer options. This is especially the case for 12-month employees - the stories we read reflect the unwelcoming reality of long, hot, and stressful summers. One parent described summer as a **“childcare desert.”**

The summer scramble for childcare starts in February. Parents scour websites looking for science camps, art camps, athletic camps, theater camps, vacation Bible schools -

anything that will provide adult oversight for their kids. The majority of them are half-day camps. The few that are “full day” might run from 8-3:30, which does not work for a 7:45am-4:45pm university workday. By early March, a matrix of options starts to form, but never enough for the entire summer.

And then registration day comes. Parents sit in front of their computer waiting for the second that registration opens. They have to be lightning fast because in 2 minutes (or less), the camp that’s in the matrix is full and the waitlists start. The best way to explain the Hunger Games at Auburn is in the faculty and staff’s own words:

“

Do you know how many hours it takes to research what is available, navigate all the crappy websites and broken links/ convoluted systems, etc.? HOURS!!! And I still haven't found any camps that have a spot open for my kid.

Paying hundreds of dollars for camps that are half-day camps each week and then building a matrix of caretakers to cover the afternoons. It's a mess.

If a parent is not on the computer starting in February or March identifying and managing enrollment opening dates, good luck finding camp options for the summer. My partner and I were in two different locations on multiple computers at the exact same moment an AU camp's registration opened, and we were still waitlisted.

My spreadsheet is ridiculous, with multiple waitlists, per week, per kid. Each week is something different, each week contingent until I hear otherwise.

It is a nightmare. My daughter is currently enrolled in the City of Auburn summer camp but only for weeks 1-5 right now, so I have to stress/sweat it out to see if I get off the waitlist for weeks 6-10? If that doesn't happen, what do I do??

The amount of time spent searching for camps and trying to piece options available on a weekly basis is overwhelming.

I actually end up hating summer because [of] the stress it puts on me as a working mother.

”

The survey asked parents of school age children who need summer care how satisfied they are with their summer options: 60% are dissatisfied, with 30% indicating they are extremely dissatisfied. We followed up with the statement, “Summer childcare causes me stress.” A full 82% of parents agreed with this statement - 58% strongly agreed.

The final survey question was related to the cost of summer childcare: 60% agreed and only 16% disagreed that it is unaffordable. One parent asked the question, “Financially it is hard to justify the costs of camp for multiple children across the whole summer, but really my only other option is to quit and be home with them?” One mother summed it up accurately: **“It’s crazy expensive, stressful, and it sucks.”**

STAFF: LET US BEND SO WE WON'T BREAK

With a severe shortage of summer childcare options, we were interested in learning more about how families cope. For many AU staff, the gaps in summer care require taking days off. One explained, *"I have to use my vacation and sick hours to stay at home with my kids if I haven't been able to find them a camp to go to."* Another offered that she would have to take four weeks off because *"there are literally no camps available for my child."* Other parents are sending their kids out of town to stay with family in order to keep working. One explained the terrible choice: *"We had to rely on out-of-town family to care for our child the last two summers. This required a lot of driving and having to choose between work and spending time with our child."*

Because of the Auburn Hunger Games, there were many pleas for more flexible schedules in the summer. One staff discussed the benefit of the Tiger Flex program during the pandemic. *"During this time, I felt most confident about my ability to properly balance work and life and perform all of my roles very well...It has been so much more difficult when we were no longer allowed to have flexibility. Not to mention creating more expenses for after school programs and babysitters. I understand that some people abuse privileges but that was not the case for the majority."* Another employee said that being able to have designated work-from-home days would be a *"gamechanger in reducing stress."* A logical point was also offered in that flex time would allow the summer workload to be more evenly distributed. When employees must take full weeks off to fill in the summer childcare gaps, it is likely that others in the unit are working harder to fill in the gap at work.

BRACING FOR IMPACT

Beyond the stress and frustration, we picked up a tone of hopelessness in some of the comments from parents. One parent said that the summer struggle is *"depressing... I don't know how I will do in the next few years."* Another explained that the family needed two incomes to provide

for the family because one salary is not enough to have one parent stay at home: *"It is a catch 22 that we live every day."* Several comments expressed the negative impact that the summer childcare shortage is having at work, but it cuts both ways, as one parent noted. *"It is woefully inadequate for full-time employees to manage and to feel good about what they provide for their families and for their careers."*

As we stressed at the beginning of this report, we want to reiterate that women are being disproportionately impacted by this childcare crisis. One mother lashed out that summer childcare responsibilities **"typically falls on the females in a dual earner house and we are DROWNING."** Another mother explained that her husband's job requires travel, so summer childcare issues always fall on her to handle.

The negative impact is occurring for both female faculty and staff. For tenure track faculty who rely on the summer to work on research, it is creating barriers for promotion and tenure. One respondent noted, *"It's interfering with a lot of your (female) tenured and tenure-track profs' careers."* In looking at tenured faculty (i.e., associate and full), 56% of the tenured male faculty have achieved the rank of full, while only 37% of tenured female faculty have achieved this rank.¹⁹ Admittedly, there is not enough detail in this data to make a firm conclusion, but getting a more nuanced understanding is warranted.

Unfortunately, it may be keeping women out of the workforce altogether. Several men noted that their wives or partners are not working outside of the home because of the childcare difficulties. A male faculty member commented, *"It is quite likely that my wife will remain outside of the local workforce because of the stress and cost associated with summer childcare."* As long as the crisis continues, it is hard to foresee a change in the opportunities for women in Auburn.

An underwater scene with a deep blue background. Numerous small, shimmering bubbles rise from the bottom. Several jellyfish are visible, their translucent bodies and tentacles catching the light. The overall atmosphere is serene yet mysterious.

“
WE
ARE
DROWNING.
”

WELCOME TO AUBURN! WE FORGOT TO TELL YOU...

The lack of adequate childcare infrastructure has been at least a decade-long problem. For the faculty and staff who move to the area because they were recruited to work for the university, we were interested in whether they were aware of the childcare shortage. Almost 350 respondents relocated to Auburn with children. The analysis highlighted that 61% of these new AU employees did not know about the lack of childcare options in the area.

We further asked about the difficulty of finding daycare for children ages 0-5. Of the 225 parents who relocated to Auburn and needed it, 55% indicated that the experience was more difficult than they expected. Nearly one third (31%) of these new AU employees were not able to get their child enrolled with their preferred Auburn daycare provider by the time they moved, and another 17% had to settle for enrolling their child with a provider who did not meet their standards.

The same pattern held for families relocating with school-age children. One third of the respondents did find accommodations for a summer camp or for an after-school program by the time they moved here, and they also indicated that it was much more difficult than they anticipated. Just over 20% moved to Auburn without having childcare accommodations in place.

The survey gave this subset of respondents the ability to comment on their relocation experience. It led to eye-opening accounts and troubling narratives about the childcare infrastructure. Three themes emerged in the comments: scarcity, quality, and the lack of AU assistance. We also learned about some of the workarounds new employees have had to use while waiting on better options.

PARENTS WHO RELOCATED TO AUBURN WITH A NEED FOR CHILDCARE



DAYCARE AGE

SCHOOL AGE

25

264

Parents who needed daycare when they moved to AU

138

Parents who needed summer or after-school program when they moved to AU

31%

Were unable to find a spot in a daycare program before moving

21%

Were unable to find a spot in summer or after-school program before moving

17%

Found a spot in a program, but it didn't meet their standards

The comments made it clear that the dearth of childcare options makes relocation to Auburn incredibly difficult. This is the case for daycare, summer camps, and even after school programs. *“The number of waitlists that exist was a shock to me,”* commented one respondent. One parent added themselves to waitlists before getting the job offer and didn’t get her preferred daycare until a year after arriving in Auburn. Two respondents had to enroll their children in daycare in Montgomery until a spot became available in Auburn. One AU staff had just relocated to Auburn and was going to have to work for at least two months before a spot might open and was currently *“having to figure out childcare in the meantime.”* Another respondent was also currently working without daycare and *“having to pay 3x the daycare rate for a daily babysitter.”*

After school programs are also full. One parent said *“we were lucky that my mom moved with us”* or the children – young ones – would be home alone for at least an hour after school. It is worth considering the added difficulty of having a tenuous childcare situation when you are new to a community and are therefore unlikely to have informal support structures in place (e.g., close friends, family).

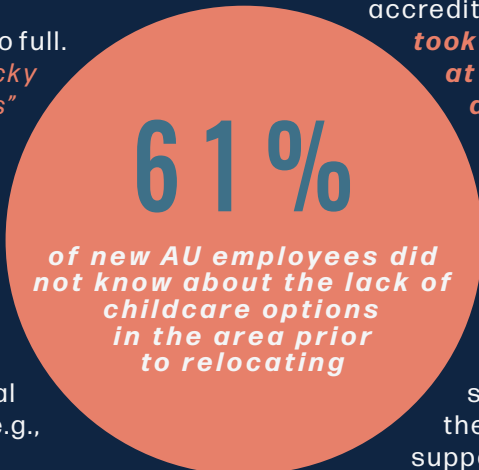
While these comments were not totally surprising because of the rest of the survey, the comments about the **quality** of childcare after relocating here were indeed discomfoting. To summarize, for folks with a reference point of the quality of care available in other locations with institutions of higher learning, Auburn falls short. There were many comments that reflected “substandard” daycare in Auburn. As one father explained, *“We decided not to enroll in daycare as there were no good options. My wife visited many and thought they were all poor quality.”* Another respondent also *“does not feel comfortable with any of the (currently available) daycare standards at present,”* and instead has opted to hire a personal sitter for

their 3-year-old.

There were also stories about children that finally did get enrolled – but with disappointing outcomes. After getting their child enrolled in a local facility, a family decided to pull their child out because, *“the care she received was pretty alarming.”* Two other respondents did not have another option – one recalled *“the painful transfer”* because of the low quality of care. Another explained that one child got into a good preschool (by paying 2.5 months of tuition to hold the spot) but had to enroll the baby into a different daycare *“which was low quality and not safe, but the only place in town that had a spot.”*

Finally, there seems to be a significant difference in care when families have relocated to Auburn after having their children in an accredited daycare facility: *“It only took a short time of enrollment at that daycare to learn what a NAEYC accreditation was (which our first daycare had in another state) and realize that childcare quality and standards are VASTLY different.”*

Finally, there were several comments that reflected both surprise and disappointment that the university did not provide any support for relocating parents. *“If AU could provide assistance with young faculty needing to find daycares, it would be extremely helpful to new faculty. It was very stressful,”* explained one parent. Another said that even something as simple as a directory of childcare options would have been helpful. The expectations were definitely unmet, as one faculty commented, *“Auburn is far, far behind other universities in terms of the support they offer. With how isolated Auburn is from other cities, you would think the university would offer better support to its employees.”* It seems clear that AU is behind the curve in being a family-friendly workplace, and this was reflected in comments in other parts of the survey as well.



LIVING WITH THE CONSEQUENCES

Insufficient childcare infrastructure creates a multitude of problems. This report lays bare the tremendous challenges that AU faculty and staff face when simply trying to raise a family. This crisis also impacts the children who feel the weight of their parents' stress and frustration.

Beyond that, there are negative consequences to the university. The findings of this study completely negate a comment that we want to highlight: *"I do not think it is my employer's problem or responsibility to figure out my childcare needs. I chose to have kids - it is my job to care for them if I plan to have a career."* The analysis clearly shows that the availability and quality of childcare infrastructure impacts job performance and talent management. In the sections below, we report on the survey findings related to the loss of productivity, the impact on retention, and the general impression that the "Auburn family" does not extend its reach to faculty and staff.

HELLO STRESS, MEET PRODUCTIVITY

For respondents who are expecting a baby, who have children currently enrolled or within the last five years, and for those who need summer childcare, we examined how much the local childcare infrastructure has impacted work-related performance. The analysis revealed that 55% agree that their productivity has been hindered, and 60% agree that the stress of it impacts their ability to focus at work. Surprisingly, there were no discernable differences between men and women. **Childcare issues affect the job performance of all AU parents.**

The comments again reflect this as stemming from the scarcity of care and the quality of

care. *"The lack of child care in the summer (and during the school year) impacts my productivity greatly,"* commented one parent. Another noted, *"The quality of the daycares also leaves much to be desired and resolving issues takes time away from being able to focus on and doing my job."* It appears that it can also be both: *"The lack of good options has definitely impacted my work productivity. When we experienced our most recent issues, it was mentally and emotionally consuming for weeks, and my work quality and output suffered."* Based on these comments and the 300+ employees who admit that childcare issues impact their job performance, we were left to wonder how much this costs the university in real dollars.

HARD TO SAY GOODBYE?

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The recruitment and retention of talented faculty and staff are cornerstones of a thriving university. We asked parents who currently need childcare or who have needed it in the past if they have thought about seeking employment elsewhere or outright resigning because of the local childcare situation. Overall, 30% of the respondents agreed that they have considered seeking another job, and 30% also agreed that they have considered resigning. One respondent noted that the summer options *"are awful and a huge factor in considering jobs elsewhere."* Another said that she *"plans to leave as soon as possible."* An expectant mother responded to the question by saying, *"I will most likely have to quit my job because, even if I can get the baby I'm pregnant with into daycare, I don't accrue time off to care for sick children and care for adult dependents."* It appears that one decision by a tenured faculty has already been made: *"The pressure of not having after school care, combined with no flexibility at*

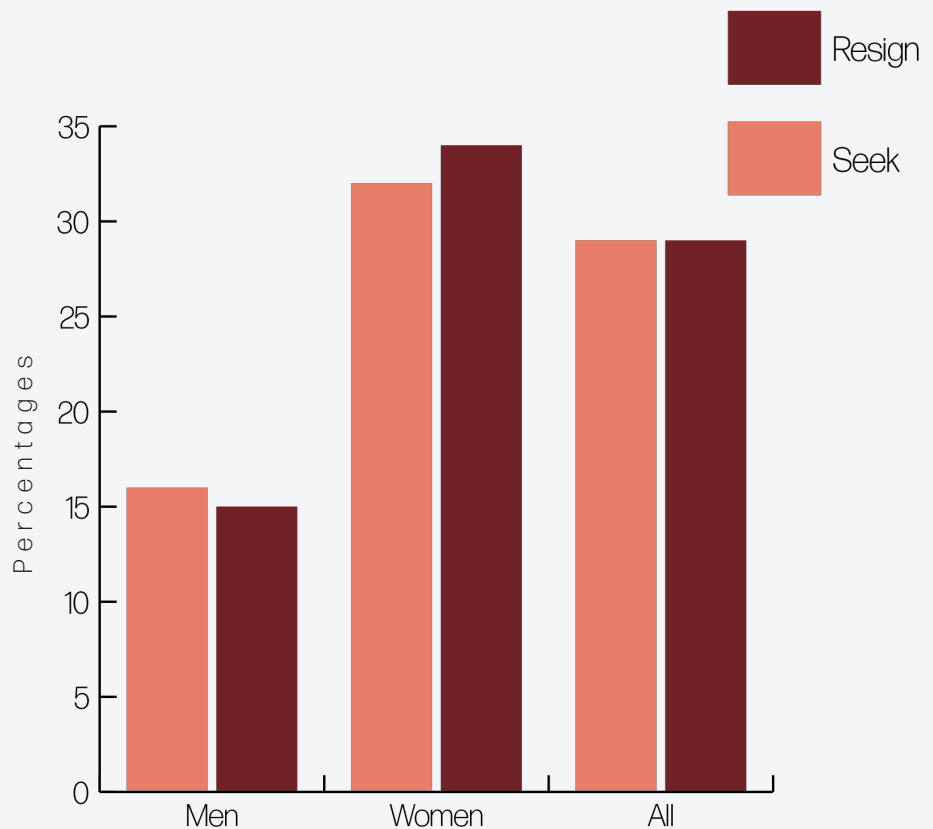
work to allow for me to handle that situation, is a direct and meaningful contributor to my decision to leave my tenured position at Auburn.”

In the case of retention, we also found a substantial difference between men and women. As the graph below indicates, **women are twice as likely to consider leaving or resigning.** This suggests that the university is much more at risk of losing its female workforce.

Other comments throughout the survey also indicate that recruitment and retention will suffer because of the lack of childcare infrastructure. For instance, one respondent noted that, *“this topic will drastically impact Auburn’s ability to recruit and retain quality*

faculty and staff - which is already a challenge at Auburn.” Another comment suggested that there are conversations about the childcare issue when a job offer is made. *“We are forced to paint a pretty alarming picture of the situation because the challenge of finding a spot is so enormous it can’t be understated,”* was iterated in one of the comments. This made us wonder, of course, whether this degree of honesty causes this department to lose their highly desirable candidates. Considering that 61% of the respondents who were recruited to Auburn were not knowledgeable about the childcare issue, it also leads to questions about how many people who get job offers would turn them down if they received this same dose of honesty.

**QUESTION:
“ARE YOU
CONSIDERING
LEAVING OR
RESIGNING
FROM AU
DUE TO
CHILDCARE
ISSUES?”**



DOES THE AUBURN FAMILY REACH FAR ENOUGH?

51% don't believe AU is aware of their needs

45% don't believe AU cares about their needs

40% don't believe department is aware of their needs

21% don't believe department cares about their needs

Finally, we assessed perceptions related to how much the university as an institution and the respondent's department/unit are a) aware of the needs of parents, and b) care about the needs of parents. The institution did not receive a glowing endorsement from parents - 51% do not believe that Auburn is aware of their needs, and more troubling, 45% don't think that the institution cares. At the department/unit level, the perceptions were better. More than 60% perceive that their department is aware and cares about their needs. However, we were also surprised that 21% of the respondents indicated that their department or unit doesn't care about the needs of parents. Considering that this is where decisions about tenure, promotions, and merit raises are most influential, we found this statistic troubling.

After analyzing the data and reading many of the comments, a natural question emerged: **Does the spirit of the "Auburn Family" extend to faculty and staff?** The childcare crisis is pulling

at the fabric of this lofty ideal because it seems to be undermining the critical sense of belonging.

One frustrated respondent exclaimed, *"Please stop using the phrase 'Auburn family' as if the University cares about our wellbeing or that of our children. The University has amply demonstrated that we are all utterly ON OUR OWN when it comes to childcare needs."* Another respondent sadly and simply said, *"Auburn likes to showcase the Auburn family, but I've never experienced it."*

We end the survey analysis with a final thought from a parent that frames the childcare infrastructure crisis through the same lens as most faculty and staff who participated in the survey. We hope that it will galvanize the community to address this issue: ***"Auburn needs to DO BETTER!!!! ... If this is how we treat our 'Auburn Family,' then this is a dysfunctional family. We should start practicing what we preach around here."***

“If this is how
we treat our
‘Auburn Family,’
then this is a
dysfunctional
family. We should
start practicing
what we preach
around here.”



BEST PRACTICES EXEMPLAR

In a recent article in Harvard Business Review, a team of cross-disciplinary researchers from Northeastern University said, **“Childcare is not a family issue, it is a business issue. It affects how we work, when we work, and for many, why we work. Moving forward, employer-provided childcare could also influence where we work. Employers that provide high-quality childcare will not only differentiate themselves from the competition but will also create a “sticky” benefit that fosters retention”**²⁰ (emphasis added). The business press is replete with studies that echo this message.

Unfortunately, most employers have been slow to understand the impact of childcare and other caregiving responsibilities on work performance. In a Harvard study, researchers found that while 80% of employees with these responsibilities indicate that it negatively impacts their job performance, only 24% of employers recognize this relationship.²¹ The researchers found that when employers do

not provide caregiving support or guidance, they incur hidden - but real - costs from reduced productivity and increased turnover. In other words, viewing childcare exclusively as a “benefit” undermines the true nature and scope of the issue. Best in class organizations see childcare infrastructure through the lens of talent management.

As part of this study, we looked at other universities’ approaches to childcare in order to understand best practices. We learned that compared to peer and aspirant institutions, Auburn provides virtually no support to working parents. We concluded that one aspirant university that more closely mirrors AU’s demographics provides an exemplar model for comparison: Purdue University. Below we outline practices and policies from Purdue that, if implemented, could create a better environment for the families of AU faculty and staff and help Auburn reach the next echelon of world-class, research-intensive universities.

HR FOCUS ON TALENT MANAGEMENT AND WELLBEING

The tag line on the Purdue HR homepage²² is, *“Developing, engaging and retaining innovative talent.”* Further, the homepage emphasizes Work-Life Integration and states, **“You are your best self when you have work-life integration. We offer several resources to help working families balance the needs of both home and work.”** There are links to several programs offered by Purdue that promote this important balance. In short, Purdue HR signals to faculty and staff that they are valued and appreciated.

AU has the “Healthy Tigers” program that emphasizes physical *wellness*, and there is also a separate program called “Thrive” that offers mental health assistance. In contrast, Purdue’s Healthy Boiler program takes a multi-faceted *wellbeing* approach that provides care related to physical wellness, emotional health, financial stability, social relationships and work-life integration, with resources provided for each. The goal is to

help employees and their families “transform their lives into the healthiest, happiest versions possible.”²³

HR FOCUS ON FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN

Part of the work-life integration at Purdue is a program called “Family Friendly @ Purdue,” that includes *“a variety of family-friendly benefits and programs to assist employees in balancing work and life.”*²⁴ **This one webpage offers a one-stop-shop for nearly everything that parents need:** mother and child benefits; leave and flexible work information; on and off campus daycare program resources; summer camp information, pregnancy resources, lactation support information; and even other family resources to support children with autism, elder care resources, and support for losing a loved one.

We want to offer a specific difference in the HR approaches between the universities as it relates to lactation support. We do this to

reflect the broad contrast in how the two universities understand their role in supporting families. Purdue notes that, *“Research has shown lactation support from an employer helps to lower health care costs, turnover rates, and absenteeism while increasing employee and student productivity and morale.”*²⁵ As such, mothers who register for the program receive a packet with information and guidance on returning to work when still breastfeeding

an infant, and the university provides an on-campus lactation consultant to help with the transition. Every building on campus must offer lactation rooms for mothers to use.

In contrast, AU has a webpage that provides information about the dozen lactation spaces on campus (to provide context, there are more than 100 buildings on campus), and it also specifies the “Lactation Policy for AU Employees,”²⁶ outlined below.

Employees will be provided reasonable break times to express breast milk for their nursing child for one year after the child’s birth. These break periods will be given each time the employee has a need to express breast milk.

An employee lactation room will be provided as a private and sanitary place, other than a bathroom, for employees to express milk during work hours. This room will provide an electrical outlet, a comfortable chair, and nearby access to running water. Employees may use their private office area to express milk, if they prefer.

A refrigerator will be made available for safe storage of expressed breast milk. Employees may use their own cooler packs to store expressed breast milk or may store milk in a designated refrigerator/freezer. Employees should provide their own containers, clearly labeled with name and date. Those using the refrigerator are responsible for keeping it clean.

All employees are expected to provide an atmosphere of support for employees who choose to express milk.

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ON CAMPUS DAYCARE FACILITIES

The West Lafayette Purdue campus boasts three NAEYC-accredited on-campus daycare facilities that support 400 children from 6 weeks to 5 years of age.²⁷ One of them has tuition tiers based on income.

The website notes that, *“Purdue University knows that providing quality childcare is vital to the quality of life for our faculty, staff, and students.... Purdue University takes pride in hiring degreed professionals as lead teachers, each with a background in early childhood education or a related field.”*

We also want to note that AU does have early childhood learning capabilities. In addition to the part-time Early Learning Center on campus, the College of Human Sciences also staffs and runs a full-time NAEYC-accredited

daycare in Birmingham called the Harris Early Learning Center.²⁸ Ironically, it is open to UAB employees, as their HR website explains that the AU daycare facility is *“available to UAB employees and provides UAB with six annual slots.”*²⁹

DOZENS OF ON-CAMPUS SUMMER PROGRAMS

Purdue supports its community by offering engaging camp experiences for children of all ages.³⁰ Camps span across multiple colleges and athletic programs. The Family Friendly HR page also provides information about dozens of off campus summer camps offered by various organizations.

For an SEC comparison, UGA has over 60 summer camps and serves over 1,100 children.³¹

FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS

Purdue notes that, *“Workplace flexibility and remote work allows Purdue University the unique opportunity to meet business needs while increasing the ability to attract and retain the most qualified talent.”* To note, AU is the **only** school we identified in our research that does not offer flexible work arrangements. In the SEC, Georgia, Tennessee, Texas A&M, and Florida all have policies and guidance for employees and supervisors.

In contrast, AU’s TigerFlex policy used during the pandemic came to a close on August 15, 2022. AU Human Resources put out a statement about the end of this policy that read in part, *“Every Auburn employee plays a vital role in being good stewards of the “Auburn Spirit” and in ensuring that the next generation of Auburn graduates will leave here understanding what it means to be a part of the Auburn Family.”*³⁴ This is not only draconian and regressive by today’s standards, it is a stunningly exclusionary statement. **Intended or not, it implies that AU employees are merely guardians of the Auburn Family - but they are not part of it.**

HOPEFUL CONSIDERATIONS

We hope that this report clearly illuminates the scope and extent of the childcare crisis in the Auburn-Opelika area. But really, we just scratched the surface in understanding the root causes and possible obstacles. Beyond highlighting best practices, we are not comfortable with making specific recommendations for how to “fix” the issue. However, we do believe that it’s critical for President Roberts and his administration to formally acknowledge that the current state of childcare infrastructure is inadequate to meet the needs of AU faculty and staff - and it brings harm to the Auburn Family.

Therefore, we urge President Roberts to formally convene a Childcare Task Force to thoroughly examine the crisis. Ideally, this task force should have time to do its due diligence in understanding the many aspects of this issue. There should also be a hard deadline to present the administration with recommendations that can be implemented in a near-, mid-, and long-term timeframe. UAB followed this model, starting in 2016. The long-term result was the construction of a new on-campus facility scheduled to open in January 2024. While not an exhaustive list, the following page offers several initiatives that the task force could consider.

We also hope that this report will bring

reflection and change to the university’s human resources leadership team. In comparing our HR group to other universities, it seems that the team has one overarching objective: to create and enforce policy. While the HR function is designed to serve the needs of the institution (which requires policy making and application), several case studies illustrate that dysfunction ensues when HR spends endless effort creating and enforcing policy rather than supporting a culture of excellence.³⁶ Vast improvements could come if leaders across the university thought of themselves as talent managers rather than rule enforcers.

While our recommendation to convene a task force is an internal initiative, we also recognize that the university cannot solve this problem in isolation. The city of Auburn, and specifically its elected leaders, bear responsibility in addressing the insufficient childcare infrastructure. They are making decisions that impact the growth of the city, and therefore, they must come to the table to work with the city’s largest employer. Finally, we also call on the state and federal officials to look at the current state of childcare infrastructure as an impediment to economic development and a healthy tax base. All stakeholders have a stake in supporting families and children.

TASK FORCE INITIATIVES

1. Reach out to Purdue and other universities to understand HR best practices related to supporting parents and well-being programs related to work-life integration.
2. Engage with AU HR to discuss flexible work arrangements for 12-month employees.
3. Examine possible ways to provide additional support and/or leave extensions for parents with preemies, particularly those that require NICU care.
4. Work with the Provost's Office to a) clarify and communicate policies about course schedules and class coverage for female faculty who are on maternity leave, and b) create guidelines for the academic units related to course schedules and meeting times that conflict with childcare responsibilities (e.g., morning and afternoon pick-up and drop-off times).
5. Gather additional information about the local daycare situation (e.g., number of centers, tuition rates, length of waitlists), especially the impact of the end of the subsidies.
6. Learn more about what resources are required to run a full-time, on-campus daycare program. Contact AU's aspirant schools that provide this service (e.g., Purdue, UT-Austin have three; ASU and UVA have two). Do these schools see providing support to families as vital to reaching their strategic goals?
7. Have discussions with the AU Development Office about the possibility of encouraging donors to create an endowment for an on-campus learning center exclusively for the AU community.
8. Work with Government Affairs to discuss the issue with state and federal elected officials. What is the state going to do if the childcare industry implodes as analysts predict?
9. Reach out to Auburn and Opelika city officials about the possibility of attracting more private investment.
10. Consider the possibility of an accredited, on-campus facility but outsourcing the management (e.g., UAB's on-campus center is managed by KinderCare; Clemson's on-campus center is managed by Bright Horizons).
11. Examine practices that enable other universities to have large summer camp programs (e.g., UGA).
12. Learn more about the current, full-time summer AU programs (e.g., Science Matters by COSAM). Are they scalable or replicable? Can AU faculty and staff receive priority status at registration?
13. Investigate the extent to which AU is losing talent, in both the recruitment and retention processes, due to a lack of support for working parents.
14. Calculate the potential cost of "quiet quitters," or those AU employees who believe the university expects them to put in work for which they will not be properly supported. They perform the minimum requirements of their job, but without any psychological commitment or enthusiasm.³⁷

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Thousands of parents bring their freshmen to the Plains every year to be embraced into the Auburn Family. They expect that an AU education will chart their children's course and shape their future. In short, parents send their kids here to win, not only in academics, but in life.

The winning commitment to students is underscored in our current strategic plan: *"Inspire and prepare students for life and careers through delivery of an excellent and supportive experience characterized by distinctive, innovative curricula and engaging student life programs."* With 48,000 freshman applicants this year, Auburn has built a national reputation for delivering an excellent student experience. No one would question the need to maintain these excellent programs - but the theory of diminishing returns suggests that after a certain point, more investment does not bring additional value if other variables remain constant. Investment in talent recruitment and retention will be a key driver in maintaining our reputation. Isn't it reasonable for AU to provide an excellent and supportive experience to AU faculty and staff - and their children?

Finding solutions to the childcare crisis requires more than support from AU leadership. We will barrel forward on this unsustainable path without a winning team approach. A thriving university is the heartbeat of a thriving Auburn community. It is imperative that all relevant stakeholders rally to find long-term and economically viable opportunities - but AU leadership must take the lead.

EVERYTHING MEANS EVERYTHING

In the spirit of the season, we close this

report with a Bruce Pearl quote from January of 2022 after a big win against Kentucky: *"We're a football school, but we're also an everything school."* With a spirit that is not afraid, we can be an everything school. The Auburn Family wins when "everything" indeed means everything.

Winning doesn't start on the field or the court. It doesn't stem from the beautiful campus facilities, the best mascot in the country, or the grand words of a strategic plan. Winning starts at home. We will be an everything school when AU faculty and staff know that their wellbeing matters and when resources that support work-life integration are aligned. For those with childcare responsibilities, AU will be an everything school when they arrive to work every day assured that their children are embraced by a community committed to charting their course and shaping their future.

AAUP'S COMMITMENT GOING FORWARD

The Executive Committee for Auburn's AAUP chapter believes that for faculty to participate fully and successfully in teaching, research and service, adequate childcare infrastructure is essential. The timing is ripe for action, especially as the university embarks on an ambitious strategic plan at the same time that the end of the childcare subsidies may very well lead to disastrous consequences. We are committed to being a voice for AU faculty and staff who have been saddled with the stress of this crisis. We also commit to publish an annual childcare infrastructure report update until this crisis is resolved. It can no longer be ignored, and our hope is that we are only one voice of many.

WAR EAGLE!

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