

Q&A about the new Children's Center

BACKGROUND: In the Fall of 2006, the College convened a committee to assist in evaluating existing campus programs for children including the Gorse Child Study Center and the StonyBrook Children's Center. Three main factors precipitated this review.

1. The Faculty Conference Committee had expressed sustained concern about access to quality childcare and the continuing uncertainty of the financial sustainability of StonyBrook Children's Center.
2. StonyBrook Children's Center had become significantly more dependent on financial support from the College to maintain its operations.
3. Needs for child study opportunities among Psychology/Education faculty and students had grown and changed.

The College engaged a consultant, Ruth Bowman, to assist with this evaluation. Bowman sponsored several forums with different constituent groups to provide feedback, including MHC faculty and staff, staff at both Gorse and StonyBrook, and parents and students currently using these programs. Simultaneously, the Faculty Conference Committee and the Staff Council solicited community feedback by conducting a child care survey with faculty and staff.

Bowman's January 2007 report was shared broadly with the community. Feedback from members of the community continued to be submitted and considered. The report concluded that "both Gorse and StonyBrook have evolved in ways that do not appear to meet current and future needs of the College in the most responsive and efficient ways" and outlined four alternative models on how the College might wish to move forward.

As an outcome to this community process, the senior staff asked that a committee be convened to investigate the feasibility of integrating the operations and function of these programs into one facility. The Child Care/Study Advisory Committee issued its report in January 2008. It found that an integrated child care/study operation, thoughtfully and successfully implemented, could meet the College's needs. The senior staff considered the Committee's report, along with community feedback collected over the course of over a year of dialogue, and decided to establish a partnership with Bright Horizons to manage this new integrated program for Mount Holyoke College.

Q. What will the new program look like?

A. In the new Gorse Children's Center at StonyBrook, as it will be called, childcare and child study programs will coexist in the current StonyBrook building (some renovation will be necessary). While the facility will be managed by an outside provider, all regular, continuing Gorse teachers and StonyBrook staff will be offered employment in the new program. All incumbent Gorse and StonyBrook children will be offered placement in the new program as well. The College will retain an oversight role, and the Psychology and Education department will retain oversight of key areas of the child study programs in particular.

Q. Childcare is not the same thing as child study or a laboratory school. Why put the two together?

A: Childcare and child study are indeed two different functions, and as such there will be distinctions among the different classrooms serving these roles. However, there are a number of advantages to bringing these two programs under one roof, since both ultimately seek to enrich children's education and development in multiple dimensions. For example, practitioners in both areas can share best practices, curricula, classroom materials, and professional development opportunities. Parents of multiple children can utilize a range of programs within one facility and one community.

Q. How will the transition work?

A. An Oversight Committee, composed of members of the Mount Holyoke College administration and faculty from the Psychology and Education Department, will establish an initial contract with Bright Horizons and provide ongoing oversight to ensure that the needs of the community continue to be met. In particular, the Oversight Committee will work to ensure that:

- there is continuity of quality care for all children currently at Gorse and StonyBrook;
- Gorse and StonyBrook staff members have the opportunity to continue their employment through Bright Horizons if they so choose, while not suffering a loss in compensation and with recognition of their accrued years of service to StonyBrook or Gorse; and
- high quality child study facilities remain available to Mount Holyoke College students and faculty.

Q. Is the College closing Gorse?

A. No. The College remains committed to offering outstanding child study programs to faculty and students as well as early education opportunities for employees and local families. The child study and preschool functions now in the Gorse Child Study Center will be housed in a shared facility with the childcare program currently offered by StonyBrook. Incumbent Gorse staff and children will be invited to continue their participation under the auspices of the new integrated program.

Q: What will happen to children currently enrolled in Gorse or StonyBrook? What about siblings?

A: All incumbent children will be offered placement in the new integrated program. There will be both preschool and child care programs, comparable to what Gorse and StonyBrook currently offer. Siblings of currently enrolled children will continue to receive priority consideration in admission.

Q: What will happen to the current Gorse and StonyBrook staff?

A: Bright Horizons will offer employment to all incumbent staff. The Human Resources Department will work with the current, regular, continuing Gorse staff to ensure that they do not suffer a loss in compensation in the transition.

Q: Will the needs of Psychology and Education faculty and students for child study, research, and observation continue to be met?

A: Yes. The laboratory school function is a critical component of the College's academic program and will continue without interruption.

Q: Gorse has a 50-year+ tradition of excellence as a laboratory school and preschool. Why change such a successful institution?

A: Gorse has indeed served the community well in its lab school and preschool functions. However, the research needs of the Psychology and Education department have evolved and will continue to evolve in the future. The integrated structure will provide a broader range of child study opportunities, enabling, for example, the study of younger and older children. Further, there are many College employees who have been unable to avail themselves of Gorse or StonyBrook for their children in their current forms.

Q: Why not leave Gorse as it is and simply add the additional needed programs to StonyBrook?

A: Offering child study programs through two separate operations would pose its own organizational challenges and would be significantly more resource-intensive given the redundancy that would be created. Keeping the two operations separate misses out on the benefits of collaboration and collegiality noted above. Maintaining two distinct operations would also perpetuate the difficulty the College currently experiences in trying to be responsive to ever-shifting childcare and child study needs.

Q: Will this new program save the College money?

A. Initially Mount Holyoke will not save money through an integrated structure, since it will require additional financial investment in facility renovations and other program start-up costs. It is too soon to predict what the long-term financial picture will be, given the variability of childcare needs in particular.

Q: Will the merger reduce the number of child study opportunities for Mount Holyoke students?

A: No. The Psychology and Education department hopes over time to expand opportunities for students in both number and variety.

Q: Child study is an important part of the Mount Holyoke curriculum. Why outsource part of the academic program to an outside, for-profit company?

A: The Psychology and Education department will retain oversight over the key elements of the child study programs. Bright Horizons has demonstrated success in operating similar programs for children for other colleges and universities, and the College has a high degree of confidence in Bright Horizons' ability to carry out its responsibility in line with Mount Holyoke's expectations for professionalism and academic rigor.

Q: Will the new structure allow qualified teachers to provide high quality academic instruction and support for students?

A: Yes. The College will set standards for teacher education and experience, and Psychology and Education faculty will continue to have a role in the hiring and oversight of teachers who are working with undergraduates. Teachers will have time built into their schedules to work with Mount Holyoke students.

Q: How will the College ensure that the quality of these programs is maintained?

A: The College will incorporate quality control measures into its contract with Bright Horizons. A group of College faculty and staff will provide ongoing oversight and direction. Parents will continue to have avenues to provide feedback as they do now. Programs will maintain accreditation through the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

Q: I have heard that there will be higher staff turnover in the new model, diminishing the quality of the programs. How will Bright Horizons prevent this from happening?

A: It is a nationwide reality that there is higher turnover among childcare staff than among laboratory school staff. Bright Horizons, though, stands out in its field for above-average compensation and less staff turnover. The Bright Horizons facility at Roosevelt University in Chicago, for example, experiences very low turnover due in large part to its relationship with the University and the teacher education program. We anticipate a similarly fruitful partnership at Mount Holyoke.

Q: Will the College still provide child care and preschool opportunities to the local community?

A: Yes. As is currently the practice at Gorse and StonyBrook, priority admission will be given to children of College employees, and remaining slots will continue to be open to the broader community.

Q: I am a parent with a child at Gorse or StonyBrook and would like to continue to send my child there. What should I do?

A: Bright Horizons will be in touch with parents directly to offer continued enrollment for your child(ren). It will be very important for them to hear from you and other parents about your interest in continued enrollment for your child(ren) so they can develop a transition plan that will meet the needs of incumbent families.

Q: Will the new Center accept applications for enrollment of children not currently participating in either program?

A: Priority will be given to providing continuity of care for incumbent children and their siblings, and new enrollments will be accepted as space permits.

Q: What will happen to the tuition structure?

A: The College does not anticipate significant changes in the tuition structure for next year. Over time, tuition levels will change in response to the funding needs of the center and the changing market for child care. The College expects Bright Horizons to maintain a competitive tuition structure given the market for comparable programs.

Q: Will there be as many childcare and preschool slots as StonyBrook and Gorse currently offer?

A. There is no set enrollment target, since the community's childcare needs will undoubtedly fluctuate. While the physical space will be less than is currently available with both buildings; the scheduling flexibility and increased variety of program options created by an integrated structure make it likely that the new Gorse Children's Center will ultimately be able to serve more children overall than are currently being served.

Q: How can I share my views about the implementation of the new integrated structure?

A: The Center Oversight Committee invites comments or suggestions about the impending transition. An e-mail listserv has been established to facilitate sending in feedback. You can write to the Oversight Committee at childrenscenter@mholyoke.edu. In addition, we expect that Bright Horizons, as the new provider, will host meetings and will provide other forms of communication with families on an ongoing basis.