Raising Expectations for Institutional Intervention: What Colleges and Universities Can Do to Support Student-Parent Success

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About the Student-Parent White Papers

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the American Council on Education (ACE) partnered in February 2022 to reimagine the future of the Carnegie Classifications. As part of this collaboration, the Carnegie Foundation and ACE are working to develop new and refined versions of the classifications that better reflect the public purpose, mission, focus, and impact of higher education. An aspect of this work involves learning from experts about key topics that can inform future methodological and data decisions. This paper and its companion piece, prepared under the direction of Lindsey P. Myers and Elizabeth Howard, seek to identify areas of interest in research and policy regarding student-parents in postsecondary education. Imaginable Futures served as a partner in this work with ACE and the Carnegie Foundation. We also appreciate Brittani Williams' constructive feedback on this paper.

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Introduction

Student-parents—also called parenting students—simultaneously pursue a postsecondary degree (e.g., an associate or bachelor's degree) or educational certificate while raising at least one child or dependent. Student-parents can include "a biological parent, stepparent, or unmarried coparent, adoptive parent, foster parent, guardian, grandparent, extended family member, or sibling caregiver" (Sick et al. 2023); in other words, any individual who is financially and physically responsible for a dependent while enrolled in postsecondary education or training is considered a student-parent.

Over one in five undergraduate students or approximately 3.1 million students across the U.S. higher education system (ACE 2023) are currently balancing the often conflicting temporal, logistical, financial, mental, and emotional demands of higher education and parenting. As we outlined in our first brief, *Student-Parent Data: What We Know, What We Don't, and How to Find Out,* this figure may be conservative due to incomplete data sources and a dearth of comprehensive data sources and a complete accounting of student-parents' enrollment (Mowreader 2024).

Despite incomplete data, we know student-parents often face significant obstacles in their pursuit of higher education, including financial challenges, time poverty (i.e., a lack of time to attend to parental, educational, and personal responsibilities), and negative interactions with higher education constructs and institutional actors and constructs (e.g., policies and practices). These challenges all contribute to student-parents' low persistence and degree acquisition rate compared to that of nonparenting students (Short et al. 2022; Cruse et al. 2019; Jez 2023). Only 18 percent of student-parents receive a bachelor's or associate degree within six years of study compared with 27 percent of independent and 54 percent of dependent or traditionally aged (i.e., between 18 and 24 years old), nonparenting students (Cruse et al. 2021). In other words, student-parents are nearly twice as likely to withdraw from higher education without a postsecondary degree as students without children (Hicks and Anderson 2024).

Student-parents' degree completion rates are lower along gender and racial lines as well as by the ages of their children and their age at the time of their first child's birth. For example, Generation Hope found less than two percent of teen student-mothers or those who have a baby by age 18 graduate with a college degree by 30 years old (Short et al. 2022). While only 28 percent of single student-mothers—the largest proportion of student-parents—earn a degree within six years of study. Across the student-parent landscape, 48 percent of student-mothers and 61 percent of student-fathers leave higher education without a credential (Williams and Breakstone 2024) with over 70 percent of Black student-fathers and 66 percent of Latino student-fathers leaving (Contreras-Mendez and Cruse 2021; Dundar, Tighe, and Turner 2023; Hanson 2024).

Bachelor's degrees are crucial for student-parents' long-term financial well-being, as single mothers who earn a bachelor's degree earn on average $625,134 more over the course of their lifetimes than single mothers without a college credential (Short et al. 2022). Degree completion decreases student-parents' likelihood of living in poverty (Short et al. 2022), positioning them and their children for career advancement and long-term financial stability as well as saving public funds spent on social services and adding more skilled workers to the workforce (Hicks and Anderson 2024). Student-parents' children are also more likely to attend college, complete a postsecondary degree themselves, and have greater "early career earnings" than children of parents without a postsecondary degree or credential (Hicks and Anderson 2024; Anderson 2022). Colleges and universities are in a unique position to better support and position student-parents for academic success through institutional interventions, initiatives, or levers, such as leveraging institutional research or data; offering comprehensive financial aid and holistic or wraparound student support services; providing accessible and affordable on-campus childcare; and expanding existing policies, practices, and services to better serve student-parents and their families.

This brief focuses on the crucial role higher education institutions play in supporting student-parents' academic success, persistence, and degree or program completion and levers institutions can pull to better position student-parents to access or tap into the long-term social and economic benefits of higher education. It begins with an overview of student-parent demographics followed by a discussion of the common challenges student-parents face in pursuing higher education. Then, it highlights the institutional-level resources, programs, and approaches that administrators, faculty, and staff can implement to support student-parents. Student-parents' sizable presence on college and university campuses is only expected to rise as more adult learners pursue postsecondary education, providing an opportunity for institutions to better recognize and serve this often-invisible student population and mitigate anticipated enrollment gaps.

Student-Parents' Intersectional Identities

Within the student-parent population, nearly three-quarters of student-parents are women (74 percent), over half are people of color (55 percent), and 88 percent are adult learners or ages 25 or older (ACE 2023)—all traditionally underrepresented and underserved student populations. In comparison to the archetypal or traditional higher education student who is embodied or envisioned as a traditionally aged (i.e., between 18 and 24 years old), White, dependent, middle-to-upper class man (Renn and Reason 2013), student-parents are predominantly Black, single-mothers who are often older, independent (i.e., not legally or financially reliant on their parents), and first-generation students (Turner and Dundar 2024; NCES 2020).

Student-parents are also more likely to face financial challenges and basic needs insecurity than their nonparenting peers (Cornett 2023), which is due in part to additional costs associated with caring for children or dependents; for example, 60 percent of student-parents were found to be housing insecure compared with 47 percent of students without dependents (Cornett 2023). Additionally, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) data showed 31 percent of student-parents lived at or below the poverty line, 30 percent received Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, and 30 percent received Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) benefits. And the Education Trust states that 68 percent of student-parents live at or near the poverty line, making higher education unaffordable and inaccessible for much of this student population (Williams et al. 2022).

Overall, the student-parent population is intersectional—comprising multiple gender identities and expressions, races and ethnicities, socioeconomic statuses, ages, and relationship statuses. Student-parents' social identities and positionality affects their interactions with and experiences of higher education and necessitates that higher education institutions adjust their policies and practices—initially designed to serve traditional students—to better serve the current and future undergraduate student populations who are more likely to be parents or caregivers (Field 2022).

Common Challenges Student-Parents Face in Higher Education

Student-parents' low persistence and degree acquisition are mainly due to the obstacles they must overcome to continue attending their respective undergraduate institutions (Haleman 2004). These challenges include financial challenges, time poverty (insufficient time to dedicate to their studies while fulfilling additional responsibilities), inaccessible childcare, and poor interactions with higher education institutions.

Financial Challenges

Student-parents are more likely to struggle financially than low-income students without dependents. In the most recent Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE 2022), student-parents—who made up nearly a third of the sample—reported greater food insecurity and were over twice as likely to face housing insecurity in the last 12 months than community college students without dependents. Student-parents' increased likelihood of basic needs insecurity (e.g., food and housing insecurity) is compounded by a greater cost of attendance than their nonparenting peers (Cornett 2023; Williams et al. 2022; Doorley, Elakbawy, and Dundar 2023; Dundar, Tighe, and Turner 2023).

The "student parent net price" or complete cost of attendance for student-parents includes not only tuition and fees, housing, food, books, and transportation—costs associated with higher education for all students—but also childcare and basic needs for their children (Montague, Waller, and Williams 2022). Education Trust found, "[the] out-of-pocket cost of attending a public college is 2 to 5 times higher for student parents than for their low-income peers without children" (Williams et al. 2022), and California Competes (2020) estimates that student-parents face an additional cost of $7,592 per year.

Despite student-parents' increased expenses and cost of attendance, they are often unaware of financial aid availability and less likely to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) compared to the general student population (Beeler 2016). In California, a third of the student-parent population did not complete the FAFSA in their first year of study (Jez 2023; Reed et al. 2021). While access to financial aid is critical to all students' initial and continued enrollment, it is especially critical for student-parents who have additional financial demands, limited time, and often limited support networks. In a study from Lumina and Gallup, over a quarter of student-parents cited the cost of higher education as their top reason for considering withdrawal—preceded only by childcare, which 37 percent of respondents cited (Rothwell 2021).

For student-parents who can access financial aid, there remains a gulf between available financial aid and social assistance and student-parents' expenses, referred to as the "student-parent affordability gap" (Williams et al. 2022). Often social service programs, such as SNAP, have complicated requirements, applications, and verification processes that limit student-parents' ability to access these critical benefits for themselves and their children. SNAP, formerly known as the food stamp program, was designed to provide low-income households and individuals with money to purchase food and meet nutritional needs (Welton, Gutierrez, and Bruecker 2023); however, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) estimates that nearly 60 percent of eligible college students do not receive SNAP benefits due to ambiguous eligibility criteria, including income, household size, citizenship, and employment or enrollment hour requirements (Welton, Gutierrez, and Bruecker 2023). Student-parents who turn to their college or university for help navigating these complex social service systems and application processes are regularly met with confusion and misinformation from staff who are unaware of possible exemptions for college students (Welton, Gutierrez, and Bruecker 2023). In response to unmet need, student-parents are more likely to take out student loans and struggle to repay them (Dundar, Tighe, and Turner 2023; Doorley, Elakbawy, and Dundar 2023). These financial challenges both perpetuate and are exacerbated by student-parents' limited time, as they must concurrently manage school, work, and parenting (Cornett 2023; Hatch and Anderson 2023).

Time Poverty

Student-parents—particularly those with children under the age of 13—have less time to spend on their education, less free time, and spend more time splitting their attention between their academics and caregiving (Conway, Wladis, and Hachey 2021). Student-parents have on average 74 less discretionary or unscheduled hours per week than their nonparenting peers (Wladis, Hachey, and Conway 2017).

Student-parents' limited time is exacerbated by their financial responsibilities. The Education Trust found that student-parents would need to work 52 hours per week to meet the cost of tuition at a four-year public institution and childcare alone, leaving little to no time to attend to their studies, spend time with their children, and address their own physical and mental health (Williams et al. 2022; Montague, Waller, and Williams 2022). Working over 20 hours per week is known to be harmful to student engagement, retention, and degree completion (Perna and Odle 2020); however, there is no state in the U.S. where student-parents could afford to pay for childcare and in-state tuition working less than 30 hours at minimum wage (Williams et al. 2022). Student-parents' limited time slows their progress to degree and negatively impacts their academic performance (Generation Hope 2023; Conway, Wladis, and Hachey 2021; LaBrenz et al. 2022). Currently, nearly three in five student-parents work full-time while enrolled in higher education (ACE 2023), with Black student-fathers working more "hours per week than the average student parent" (Heckstall and Collins 2023). Black student-fathers also have the lowest degree complete rate amongst the student-parent population (Williams and Breakstone 2024). In other words, student-parents' attendance costs necessitate working nearly full-time, which increases their likelihood of leaving higher education without a degree or credential within six years of study (Perna and Odle 2020).

Student-parents' limited time, much of which must be dedicated to paid work, also encourages them to pursue part-time enrollment (Perna and Odle 2020; Conway, Wladis, and Hachey 2021). In a recent study including 13,494 student-parents from over 100 two-year and four-year institutions, Trellis found that 73 percent of student-parents were enrolled part time (Cornett 2023; Mowreader 2023). Part-time enrollment increases student-parents' time-to-degree and opportunity cost (i.e., the loss of income that could be gained while attending school) and can reduce their financial aid eligibility (Perna and Odle 2020; Williams et al. 2022), which raises their overall cost of attendance and can intensify the financial challenges discussed above. Time away from higher education can be particularly detrimental for student-parents who often already feel detached from their campus community, making it more likely that they will leave the institution.

Inaccessible Childcare

Accessible and affordable childcare, particularly on-campus childcare, is crucial for student-parents' enrollment and academic success because it affords them the time and opportunity to attend classes while ensuring their children are well supervised and cared for (Ogunsiji and Wilkes 2005; Robinson 2010; Vann-Johnson 2004). In a study from Monroe Community College, student-parents who utilized the on-campus childcare center were more likely to persist year-to-year and three times more likely to either graduate with an associate degree or transfer to a bachelor's degree–granting institution within three years than student-parents who did not utilize the center (Eckerson et al. 2016).

In their analysis of teen mothers' educational attainment, Maslowsky, Strizel, and Gershoff (2021) found that teen parents who could utilize childcare were ten times more likely to complete at least some college. Additionally, Wild and Ebbers (2002) found that 95 percent of their student-mother respondents assumed they could not continue with their pursuit of higher education without childcare being available on campus because it is intricately tied to and impacted by other barriers facing them—namely poor finances, lack of reliable transportation, and limited amounts of time (Kensinger and Minnick 2018; Robinson 2010). IWPR (Cruse et al. 2021) found that U.S. families pay on average $10,000 per year for infant, toddler, or four-year-old childcare, which is a significant financial barrier to student-parents' college enrollment and completion. The Center for American Progress found that the cost of high-quality childcare is on par with the cost of college tuition, and student-parents are more likely to prioritize their children's needs above their own, leading to greater withdrawal rates (Workman 2021; Andrews 2023).

Childcare is not only expensive but also often inaccessible due to distance, low capacity, and teacher and staff shortages (Workman 2021; Nzau and Caldwell 2023); specifically, over half of families live in "childcare deserts" (Malik et al. 2018) or geographic areas where "there are three or more children for each licensed childcare slot"

(Jessen-Howard, Malik, and Falgout 2020). Although on-campus childcare centers are conveniently located and well posed to support student-parent success, they are often inaccessible to and underutilized by student-parents. Student-parents often report either being unaware of on-campus childcare centers and services or unable to enroll their children due to either the cost or extensive waitlists (Brown and Nichols 2013; Cruse et al. 2021); specifically, Generation Hope (2023) found that 92 percent of participating student-parents in the District of Columbia (D.C.) region were unaware of or unable to access on-campus childcare, and 78 percent "wished their campuses did more to support their childcare needs."

Due to space, staffing, and financial constraints, on-campus childcare centers have limited capacity to fulfill the growing need of student-parents and those of the rest of the campus community (e.g., faculty, staff, and administrators). While most childcare centers have extensive, sometimes yearlong waitlists for spots, many also have complicated priority systems, which make it more difficult for student-parents to enroll their children (Cruse et al. 2021). Although some childcare centers prioritize undergraduate student-parents, others prioritize faculty or staff enrollment over student-parents; others prioritize space allocation based on income, student status (e.g., graduate or undergraduate status and part-time or full-time enrollment), sibling enrollment, veteran status, and other factors (Cruse et al. 2021).

Despite the growing number of student-parents and their need for childcare, campuses are in fact reducing childcare centers (Smith 2023), particularly at community colleges, where nearly half of student-parents are enrolled (ACE 2023). Between 2004 and 2019, the presence of childcare centers on community college campuses has decreased by 17 percent (Wood 2023). The Center for Law and Social Policy's report on Black student-fathers also found that fewer than half of public colleges (43 percent) and only 20 percent of Historically Black Colleges and Universities have on-campus childcare centers (Heckstall and Collins 2023).

Negative Interactions with Higher Education Constructs

Student-parents often interact with ill-informed or unaware faculty, staff, and peers and have limited access to campus resources, which contributes to their increased likelihood of leaving higher education without a degree or credential (Ajandi 2011; Kensinger and Minnick 2018; Robinson 2010; Yakaboski 2010; Wilsey 2013). In a study of student-parents' mental health, Aspen Institute and The Jed Foundation (2021) found that over 50 percent of student-parents felt unwelcome on their college or university campus, and only 37 percent felt their institution was "supportive of student-parents." Yakaboski (2010) reported student-mothers encountered ignorance, stigmatization, and little help from higher education staff. For instance, Robinson's (2010) dissertation study described student-mothers' negative experiences with campus financial aid administrators who were unaware of their eligibility for federal and state financial aid. Similarly, McLaughlin (2009) described how negative interactions with financial aid administrators discouraged student-mothers from seeking out and applying for financial aid. Student-fathers also express feeling ignored, overlooked, and underserved by institutional faculty, staff, and support services, including those interested in supporting student-parents, which tend to focus on and prioritize mothers over fathers (Williams and Breakstone 2024).

Student-parents' negative interactions with institutional actors is especially concerning given that positive connections with faculty, staff, and peers as well as students' perception of the campus community are central for student persistence and retention (Cerven 2013). It follows that student-parents' feelings of isolation and alienation contribute to their low degree acquisition; for instance, nearly 40 percent of Aspen and JED's student-parent sample "considered dropping out of college within the previous month" (Smith 2023). Student-parents—similar to other traditionally underrepresented student groups—can especially benefit from relationships with faculty and staff who can provide information on and access to helpful institutional resources, such as campus food pantries, student-parent-specific support programs, research and internship opportunities, and academic support or tutoring services (Sallee and Stefanese Yates 2023).

Additionally, higher education institutions largely design their programs and services in ways that support traditional students, namely those students who are full-time, residential, and financially supported by their parents without caregiving or other responsibilities external to the institution, which inadvertently excludes student-parents and other traditionally underrepresented student populations. For example, on-campus childcare centers have limited hours that do not typically align with student-parents' needs. Yakaboski (2010) found that on-campus childcare centers generally maintain traditional working hours, which can bar student-parents from attending evening classes (Pare 2009) and negatively impact their ability to both work and maintain their progress-to-degree. In addition, Yakaboski (2010) highlighted that on-campus childcare centers' schedules typically mirror kindergarten to twelfth grade (K–12) academic calendars rather than the college or university's academic calendar. This schedule misalignment forces student-parents to arrange and pay for additional childcare to meet their academic demands (Yakaboski 2010). Student support services, such as the financial aid office, disability and accessibility services, and academic advising offices, also typically follow traditional working hours, which makes it difficult for both student-parents who are only on campus in the evening as well as those who are in back-to-back classes during the day to access these vital offices and services.

Institutional Levers

Colleges and universities can help mitigate the common challenges student-parents face in their pursuit of higher education by institutionalizing support or strategically building support and responsibility for student-parents across campus. Although federal- and state-level policies and initiatives are also critical in supporting student-parents' enrollment and degree completion, this brief focuses on institutions' locus of control and highlights institution-level policies and practices that campus administrators can design and implement as well as preexisting services to better support student-parents' academic success, retention, and completion. By focusing on policies, practices, or systems that student-parents frequently interact with on campus, we hope to motivate institutional actors to recognize ways they can adjust institutional practices to better support their student-parent population.

Institutional Data

To begin developing a strategic approach to supporting student-parents, institutions must reflect on and improve their data collection practices and institutional knowledge of the student-parent population (e.g., the number of student-parents enrolled, student-parent demographics, and student-parents' time-to-degree). Best practices for data collection on student-parents at the institutional level involves collaboration between institutional research, admissions or enrollment management, academic advising, financial aid, and other student service offices or departments to collect frequent, comprehensive information on student-parents' enrollment, persistence, and graduation rates as well as their utilization of campus resources or services and the effects of support services on student-parent degree completion. However, data collection can begin with implementing a question on prospective students' application and admitted students' enrollment paperwork. Colleges and universities may also consider asking questions related to parenting status more regularly through the course registration process or system. Data on student-parents is foundational to building institutional support or buy-in across campus and advocating for dedicated human and financial resources to support them. Leveraging institutional data on student-parents is discussed in detail in our preceding piece—*Student-Parent Data: What We Know, What We Don't, and How to Find Out.*

Financial Aid

As discussed above, student-parents face sizable financial barriers to their academic success, progress, and completion, including greater basic needs insecurity than their low-income, nonparenting peers. These financial challenges are exacerbated by students often being unfamiliar with and uncomfortable navigating the financial aid process, leaving many student-parents without access to federal, state, and institutional aid as well as a complete

picture of their cost of attendance to make informed decisions about their enrollment, student loans, and other critical decisions for themselves and their families. Colleges and universities can improve student-parents' experiences with the financial aid process by increasing financial aid administrators' awareness and knowledge of student-parents and either providing specific training or support for professional development on student-parent FAFSA completion and other financial aid policies related to students with dependents.

Student-parents are often expected to be proactive, advocate for their own needs, and seek out resources; however, student-parents may feel uncomfortable self-identifying as a parent on campus and asking for additional support. Students are also often unaware of the resources available to them. Institutions can mitigate these challenges by centering and valuing students' holistic identities, including parenting, and training financial aid professionals to be knowledgeable about social service programs and their application processes. Institutions should also consider adjusting the financial aid office's hours of operation and providing additional online support to provide student-parents with more flexible and convenient opportunities for support.

Unanticipated emergency expenses, such as car repairs, children's prescription costs, lost income from missing work, and others can present insurmountable hurdles for student-parents and even derail their educational trajectory. To mitigate the impact of emergency expenses, many colleges and universities now offer all students emergency grants, aid, or scholarships, yet student-parents can struggle with institutions' administrative processes or red tape and meeting eligibility requirements for this critical funding. Colleges and universities could make these funds more accessible by smoothing the application process and reducing eligibility requirements that pose a challenge to student-parents, particularly enrollment or course credit and work requirements.

Holistic or Wraparound Student Support Services

Related to the financial barriers that student-parents regularly face, colleges and universities can leverage existing holistic and wraparound student support services, such as on-campus food pantries, tutoring services, transportation assistance, career services, and mental health counseling, and ensure that student-parents are both aware of and able to access these services. Institutions can improve their communication of student support services and ensure that student-parents are aware of these services through student-parent specific listservs, orientation programs, and information hubs or easily navigable websites. To improve these services, institutions can also reflect on when and where these services are available and adjust them to best serve the unique schedules of their student-parents; for example, providing after hours and virtual support for tutoring and career services and curbside distribution or pick-up for campus food pantries.

On-Campus Childcare Centers

Campus childcare centers are well positioned to provide student-parents with a truly vital, basic need for their enrollment and continued attendance, namely affordable, safe, conveniently located, high-quality childcare for their children. For those higher education institutions with on-campus childcare centers, institutions often struggle to financially support them, and the centers face capacity, staffing, licensing and other constraints that limit their ability to serve student-parents.

Institutions can better support their on-campus childcare centers and their student-parents' ability to access this resource by exploring additional funding streams, such as applying for the U.S. Department of Education's Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) program. Institutions without on-campus childcare can also apply for this program to access funding to "establish campus-based childcare programs primarily serving the needs of low-income students" (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). CCAMPIS funds can also be used to help low-income student-parents access before- and after-school care for school-aged children (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.)—a service that is sorely lacking and often little discussed.

Institutions can also look toward their state higher education system and other state-based support to supplement their on-campus childcare program, such as New York state's new initiative to increase funding and childcare capacity at 12 community colleges across the State University of New York system (Sallee et al. 2024). Institutions can also help mitigate challenges and expand capacity at their on-campus childcare centers by facilitating relationships between academic programs and childcare centers—specifically, partnering with academic majors or programs, such as early childhood education, psychology, and nursing (Cruse and Holtzman 2021) to creating internship, practicum, or work study opportunities for current students in the center. These types of reciprocal relationships or academic partnerships can be beneficial to on-campus childcare centers by creating a reliable source or conduit for future staff and providing professional development and continued educational opportunities for current staff.

Higher education institutions could also consider providing financial subsidies or support for conveniently located, high-quality childcare off campus. Subsidizing childcare would not only benefit student-parents but also their children; having a supportive, caring environment is good for children's development, and parents with a bachelor's degree have higher earnings and are more likely to offer financial stability to their children (Montague, Waller, and Williams 2022). Ultimately, childcare positions student-parents for "higher educational attainment and more positive outcomes for their kids" (Montague, Waller, and Williams 2022).

Leverage Available Information and Access Resources Through Participation in Communities of Practice

Several national organizations have communities of practice or other cooperative learning initiatives available for institutions to learn about promising practices for supporting student-parents and to develop strategic plans to implement changes to better support these students. These professional development opportunities may also include access to financial resource support. Opportunities for higher education institutions include:

- **Aspen Institute's Parent Powered Solutions Fund**, which provides an opportunity for higher education institutions and organizations to apply for between $12,500 and $25,000 in funding to develop programs to support student-parent degree completion (Croom 2020); awardees "also participate in a yearlong peer-learning cohort" to improve student-parent engagement and degree acquisition (Ascend at the Aspen Institute, n.d.)

- **Achieving the Dream's Community College Women Succeed (CCWS) Initiative**, which is designed to help community colleges "identify and promote effective strategies that help adult women students, particularly student mothers, succeed" (Achieving the Dream, n.d.; Hatch and Anderson 2023)

- **Generation Hope's FamilyUSeal**, which is a three-year certification program that awards higher education institutions and organizations with either $15,000 or $25,000 to support their student-parent focused work (Weissman 2023); the program is designed to assist "colleges and universities [to] build their capacity to better serve this population" (Generation Hope 2023)

Innovative Institutional Initiatives, Policies, and Practices

Since 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic, the topic of student-parents in higher education has received necessary, increased attention from various stakeholders, including federal, state, and local policymakers; higher education institutions and practitioners; and nonprofits, think tanks, and policy shops interested in higher education. On college and university campuses, a number of innovative practices have emerged to address and fulfill the unique needs of student-parents, positioning them for success. Some of these innovative practices include expanding

access to on-campus childcare services through strategic partnerships; visibly centering and stating a commitment to student-parents through forward facing websites and other informational hubs; providing specially designed on-campus housing for student-parents; expanding pathways to credit and degree acquisition through credit for prior learning; and designing student-parent-specific support programs and spaces.

Expanding Access to On-Campus Childcare Services

Recently, the National Head Start Association (NHSA) and the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) partnered to bring Head Start—a federally funded program that provides free early childhood education for low-income families—to community and technical college campuses across the country (Weissman 2023). This partnership was designed with student-parents' academic success in mind, given the high percentage of student-parents enrolled in community colleges as well as the high percentage of student-parents who are low-income and would likely qualify for the program. Head Start not only provides free educational childcare and preschool for children (ages zero to five) from low-income families but also provides services to parents such as parenting workshops and advising for higher education and career-planning (Cruse and Holtzman 2021; Sallee et al. 2024). When Head Start programs are located on college campuses their staff often become a hub of information for student-parents and can help them navigate the institution and refer them to additional support services (Cruse and Holtzman 2021). In addition to directly benefiting student-parents, this partnership can also benefit the institution by providing an additional source of financial support for on-campus childcare and cultivating relationships between the host institution and its surrounding community, which can better connect students with basic needs support and social services (Cruse and Holtzman 2021).

Other institutions have utilized similar partnerships to provide drop-in, after-hours childcare services for student-parents at little to no cost to the institution. Martin University in Indianapolis utilizes current students coupled with grant funding to provide student-parents free, drop-in childcare, including evenings (Rafford 2024). The flexibility of drop-in care affords student-parents the opportunity to attend more in-person classes, to become more engaged on campus through participation in extracurriculars, and to spend more uninterrupted time studying or working on group projects and other assignments.

Higher education institutions can also adopt a two-generation approach to providing on-campus childcare for student-parents; for example, El Paso Community College developed Family College as a program to provide student-parents—particularly single parents without alternative childcare—an opportunity to pursue higher education. The Family College program provides free, entertaining, and educational classes for their children to attend while student-parents attend weeknight and weekend courses (Perez 2023). These classes are available to children ages six to 14 and focus on reading, Spanish language, computer or technology, gymnastics, math, and Minecraft. Providing free evening and weekend childcare allows student-parents to remain enrolled and continue their momentum toward degree completion by mitigating childcare costs and opening up additional course options. This structure also exposes student-parents' children to higher education at young ages and provides academic skills, positioning them for future higher education enrollment.

Visibly Centering a Commitment to Support Student-Parents

Some institutions, including California Polytechnic State University (Cal Poly), are leading the way in visibly centering and stating their commitment to student-parent success. For example, Cal Poly has a central hub of information for student-parents located on their Office of the Dean of Students' website. Providing student-parents a central or single location to access vital information for navigating the institution (e.g., information and links to course registration, basic needs support, financial aid, student mental health and wellness, childcare, student life, academic support services, Title IX) as well as off-campus support (e.g., information on affordable housing, childcare funding and providers, and other social service programs) smooths student-parents' transitions and supports their persistence (California Polytechnic State University, n.d.).

Providing Specialized, On-Campus Housing for Student-Parents

Providing housing on campus also meets a critical need of student-parents who often struggle to secure housing close to campus (Beeler 2016; McLaughlin 2009; Robinson 2010; Vann-Johnson 2004). On-campus family housing supports student-parents' continued enrollment by mitigating transportation costs and commute time—both addressing their financial challenges and time poverty. Family housing also creates an environment where student-parents can bring their full identity to campus and form bonds with students of similar circumstances (Yakaboski 2010). Ultimately, family or on-campus housing specifically for student-parents cultivates a greater sense of belonging and community building, which can mitigate student-parents' feelings of isolation—a precursor of withdrawal.

Berea College is focusing on "student-parents to extend its [work college] mission across generations through its Non-Traditional Student Program" that provides housing for students aged 23 or older, who are married, and/or have a child or children (Soares and Choitz 2022). By providing student-parents with housing while pursuing postsecondary education or workforce training, Berea College and other work colleges are providing student-parents with a more affordable pathway to higher education. Similarly, Jackson College in Jackson, Michigan opened the Jets Village, a group of tiny homes to provide family housing to student-parents (Gebhardt 2023). In addition to housing, Jets Village provides student-parents with "employment services, academic tutoring, priority hiring for part-time campus employment, and student success mentoring" (Gebhardt 2023). Participating students shared with *Community College Daily* that the program helps mitigate the stress of pursuing higher education while parenting and provides vital tools to succeed (Gebhardt 2023).

Other institutions and higher education systems, such as the Kentucky Community and Technical College System, partner with Family Scholar House, a nonprofit organization that provides residential and educational support for student-parents, foster care alumni, and other low-income families with housing insecurity and—sometimes—domestic violence (Family Scholar House 2024). Family Scholar House recently expanded to Anderson, Indiana and provides student-parents a low-cost housing option to attend any of the local higher education institutions. Anderson Scholar House also provides student-parents support accessing social services, scholarships, and grants to offset the cost of higher education and access to community organizations for mental health services and academic and career planning (Slaby 2023). The Family Scholar House model has an 86 percent graduation rate and 99 percent move on to stable housing, reducing the cycle of poverty (Slaby 2023).

Expanding Pathways to Credit and Degree Acquisition

Student-parents' competing demands and limited time necessitates increased flexibility and smoother pathways to and through higher education. Often, these initiatives also work well for all adult learners—who compose nearly 90 percent of the student-parent population; for example, the City University of New York's (CUNY) credit for prior learning program shortens students' time to degree by awarding credits for previous professional experience and military service (Westbrook 2023). The program was found to shorten participating students' time to a four-year degree by one year (Westbrook 2023). Because students' time to degree is negatively correlated with degree completion (Pare 2009; McLaughlin 2009), reducing students' time commitment through credit for prior learning programs is likely to increase student-parents' degree acquisition.

Designing Student-Parent Support Programs and Spaces

A number of colleges and universities have implemented student-parent specific support programs and/or spaces on campus to provide parenting students a go-to place and well-informed staff to help them progress through their respective academic programs and navigate the complexities of the higher education system. For instance, the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee has the Student Parent Success Program, which provides parenting students with discounted childcare, peer mentorship, and access to financial aid support and referrals to campus

and community resources. This program incorporates additional best practices for supporting student-parents, such as dedicated or reserve childcare spots for student-parents to enroll their children in the on-campus childcare center, additional financial support to offset childcare cost, and family programming and events (University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, n.d.). The Ohio State University has provided specific support for student-parents through its ACCESS Collaborative—an academic and social support program—for over 30 years (OSU, n.d.a). The ACCESS Collaborative is available to both part-time and full-time student-parents who maintain at least a 2.0 grade point average and have full custody of their children. The program offers scholarships, mentoring opportunities, housing assistance, and parenting workshops. ACCESS also partnered with the university's libraries to offer a family zone that provides a space and resources for both student-parents and their children (OSU, n.d.).

Examples from the community college sector—where nearly half of all student-parents are enrolled (ACE 2023)—include Frederick Community College, Howard Community College, Windward Community College, and many others. Frederick Community College offers student-parents a cohort-based model that includes a specially designed curriculum, which can be used to satisfy students' general education requirements, financial assistance, priority registration, and coaching (Frederick Community College, n.d.). Frederick Community College is also a member of the College Success for Single Mothers Project—a grant-funded, three-year program focused on building community college's data collection capacity, including identifying student-mothers—and uses this information to inform campus support services (Goodman, Osche, and Hatch 2023). Howard Community College's Parent Scholars Program offers case management or referrals to campus and community resources, personal and career counseling, social events, academic progress sessions, and access to scholarships for "displaced homemaker(s) who [are] unemployed or underemployed, single parent(s) (male or female) who is the sole head of household and provides the majority financial support for the family, and single pregnant wom[en]" (Howard Community College, n.d.). Windward Community College—a part of the University of Hawaii system and another member of the College Success for Single Mothers Project—incorporates several effective institutional practices for supporting parenting students, such as a student parent success committee, a student-parent data collection dashboard and website, and an on-campus childcare center that is free for eligible students (University of Hawaii 2024; Windward Community College, n.d.). In addition to the examples highlighted here, ACE continues to work with numerous member institutions dedicated to improving student-parent success.

Ascend at the Aspen Institute named "identity[ing] or creat[ing] family-friendly spaces on campus" as one of the top five promising practices for supporting student-parents (Mosle, Sims, and Croom 2023), and more institutions are following suit and beginning to design student-parent or family-friendly spaces. These spaces may include family-friendly study lounges, playrooms, or areas for student-parents' children; additional nursing or lactation rooms; and specially designed study carrels for students with infants and toddlers. Another example of a student-parent specific support program and space includes Boise State University's Family Study Room, which was also featured by New America for its new family-friendly space within the university's library (Sattelmeyer 2023).

Conclusion

To truly support student-parents' persistence and position them for academic success, degree completion, and positive post-graduation outcomes, institutions need to cultivate a family-friendly campus and an institutional commitment for supporting student-parents at every level. In addition to the institutional levers and innovative initiatives described above, we provide the following implications for practice with institutions' financial constraints in mind:

Increase Visibility of Student-Parents

- Institutions can begin to increase awareness of and attention to student-parents by integrating information on student-parents into faculty and staff onboarding, training, and ongoing professional development and by offering or advertising specialized workshops or other learning opportunities focused on student-parents.

  - Colleges and universities can both access and share free, open-access resources and professional development or continual learning opportunities focused on student-parents through outlets such as the Student-Parent Action through Research Knowledge (SPARK) Collaborative.

  - Institutions should especially focus on increasing financial aid administrators, disability and accessibility services professionals, and other professionals working in critical student-facing roles' knowledge of student-parents. Student-parents often have negative interactions with financial aid and other administrative offices on campus, which can have long-term negative effects on their ability to enroll and persist to graduation.

- Institutions can also increase knowledge and support of student-parents on their respective campuses by developing or enhancing student-parent data collection and sharing the data widely.

  - Institutions can begin to collect data by adding a question or questions focused on parenting status to established student-level data collection (e.g., enrollment or course registration forms). The Urban Institute's Data-to-Action Campaign provides examples of possible questions and data collection approaches that colleges and universities can adapt to their institutional needs and processes.

  - Institutions should also widely advertise and share data on student-parents with faculty, staff, and students. These metrics can be added to existing institutional dashboards, highlighted on institutional websites, and added to student advising and alert systems.

- Institutions can utilize established institutional practices to center and build community for student-parents.

  - Leveraging data collection on their student-parent population, colleges and universities can create a student-parent email listserv to directly contact this student population, particularly to share information on campus support services (e.g., campus food pantries, campus childcare, tutoring or academic support services) that student-parents are often unaware of.

  - Institutions may also consider offering specific or specialized orientation programming and materials for parenting students, adapting orientation to better serve student-parents (e.g., offering a virtual orientation program, providing drop-in childcare during orientation, or allowing student-parents to bring their children to campus during orientation), or inviting student-parents to nontraditional student orientation if already offered at the institution.

  - Institutional leadership can provide and encourage faculty to add a statement to their syllabi focused on sharing campus resources with student-parents.

  - Institutions can also support student-led or powered initiatives focused on student-parents, such as student-parents student organization and clubs, by offering them a meeting space on campus, providing them access to student organization or student government funding, and advertising their programs on the institution's social media platforms.

Develop More Inclusive Wraparound Services

- Build coalition or cooperation across student affairs functional areas to capitalize on the institution's limited financial and human resources in support of student-parents and ensure that there is no duplication of efforts. For example, basic needs support services such as campus food pantries and career services can pool their efforts and resources to incorporate a professional clothing closet for all students to access for interviewing. Campus childcare centers and academic programs can also effectively partner and develop a symbiotic relationship, providing conveniently located, tangible professional development and learning opportunities for students in related fields (e.g., early childhood education, social work, and psychology) and saving the center temporal and financial resources related to staffing. By opening lines of communication across functional areas and offices, institutions can more easily practice universal design (i.e., design programs, policies, and services that meet the needs of all students rather than solely traditional students).

- Institutions can adjust their well-established support services (e.g., library services, career services, academic advising, tutoring, mental health counseling) to better serve student-parents. For example, expanding office hours, offering more virtual support, and allowing student-parents to bring their children to campus positions student-parents to fully take advantage of holistic support offered on campus at little extra cost to the institution. Enhancing established services also helps mitigate institutional challenges with support program sustainability.

- Colleges and universities should leverage and build relationships with community-based organizations (e.g., Scholar Houses, local food pantries, college access organizations) to refer student-parents to additional specialized support.

- Institutions can look for external funding for student-parent support programs and initiatives. For example, institutions can dedicate some institutional resources to apply for the U.S. Department of Education's Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) program to develop new or support longstanding campus childcare centers. Institutions can also look to national organizations focused on student-parents to tap into grant funding and other financial resources, stay well informed on the student-parent population and effective practices for supporting them, and build relationships with other like-minded, student-centered professionals.

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