

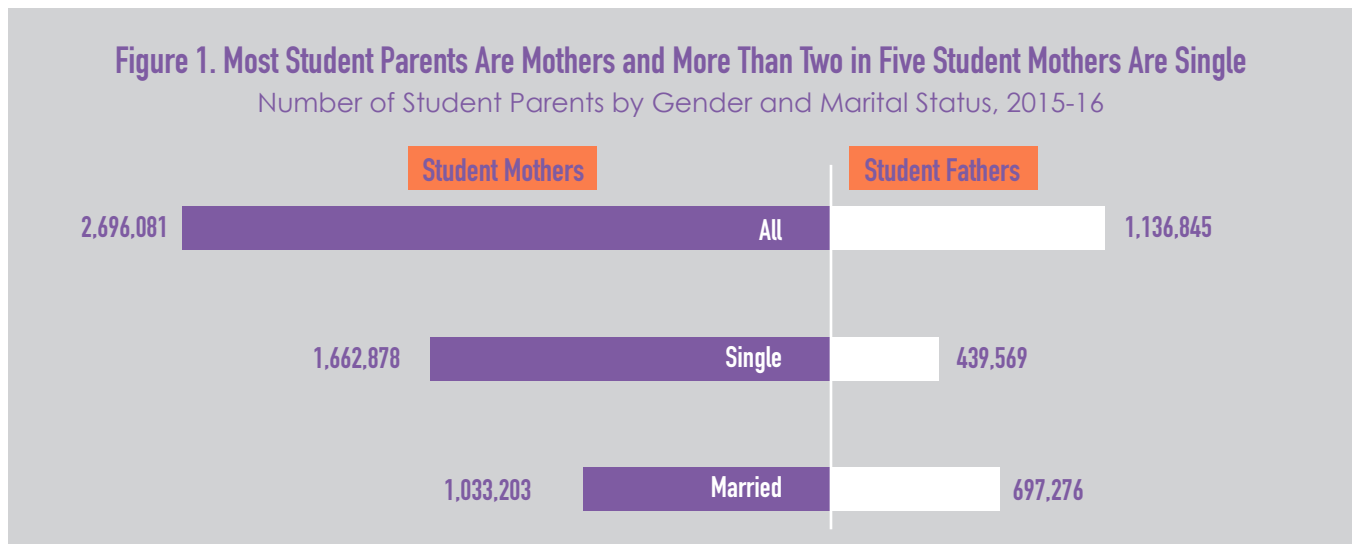
# PARENTS IN COLLEGE

## By the Numbers

Two-generation (2Gen) programs and policies create opportunities that allow adults and the children in their lives to build on each other's successes. Ensuring that both parents and children have access to affordable, high-quality educational opportunities, for example, is a core component of a 2Gen approach. Investments in the postsecondary success of parents with young children can increase attainment of credentials leading to good jobs, bring children the benefits of high-quality learning environments, promote later college-going among children, and improve family economic security across generations.

### Today's Student Parent Population

More than one in five college students—or 22 percent of all undergraduates—are parents, according to new analysis of data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study.<sup>1</sup> Of the 3.8 million students who are raising children while in college, roughly 2.7 million (or 70 percent) are mothers and 1.1 million (30 percent) are fathers (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> The 1.7 million single student mothers enrolled as of 2015-16 represent more than two in five student parents (43 percent). While the majority of mothers in college are single parents (62 percent), the majority of fathers are married (61 percent). In other words, fathers in college are 1.6 times more likely to be married than single and student mothers are 1.6 times more likely to be single than married (Figure 1).



Source: IWPR analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015-16 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:16) and Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) Spring 2001 through Spring 2017, Fall Enrollment component.



# “WE HAVE TO MEET EVERY PARENT, EACH FAMILY WHERE THEY ARE.”

- Tameka Henry, Ascend Parent Advisor

Between the 2011-12 and 2015-16 academic years, the share of students who are parents declined by 15 percent and the total number declined by 20 percent.<sup>3</sup> While enrollment among all undergraduates decreased in that time (by roughly 6 percent), the number of college students who are parents dropped more sharply than among students overall. A number of factors may have contributed to the declining share of college students with children, including declining unemployment over this time period following the end of the Great Recession, and the rising cost of college in combination with the continued high cost of non-tuition expenses like child care, housing, and transportation.<sup>4</sup> Such factors may have disproportionately affected student parents' ability to afford college as well as their assessments of the relative benefits of college enrollment compared with the immediate benefits of working without attending school. The closure of more than 100 for-profit colleges between 2012 and 2016 probably also contributed to parents' decreased share of the student body.<sup>5</sup> The number of student parents enrolled in for-profits declined by 39 percent between 2011-12 and 2015-16 (the largest decline among all institution types), compared with a 25 percent decline in the number of parents enrolled in community colleges and a 12 percent decline in those enrolled in public four-year colleges.<sup>6</sup>

The largest share of student parents is enrolled in community colleges (42 percent of all student parents are community college students; Figure 2). Similar shares of student parents attend private for-profit and public four-year institutions (18 percent and 17 percent, respectively), with the remainder

## College Students Who Are Parents . . .

Represent one in five college students.

Are likely to attend community college, though they make up a disproportionate share of for-profit college students.

Are more likely to be students of color than White.

Are older than nonparents.

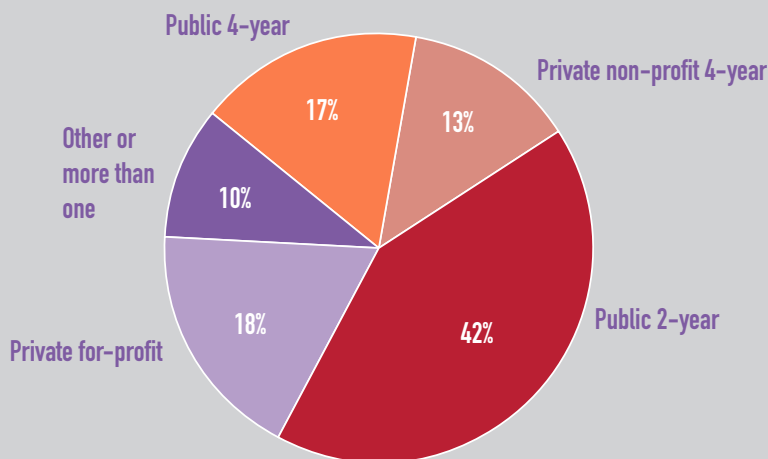
Are likely to have children who are preschool-aged or younger.

Have nearly twice the student loan debt of students overall.

Have higher GPAs than students who are not parents.

**Figure 2. The Largest Share of Student Parents Attends Community Colleges**

Distribution of All Student Parents by Institution Type, 2015-16

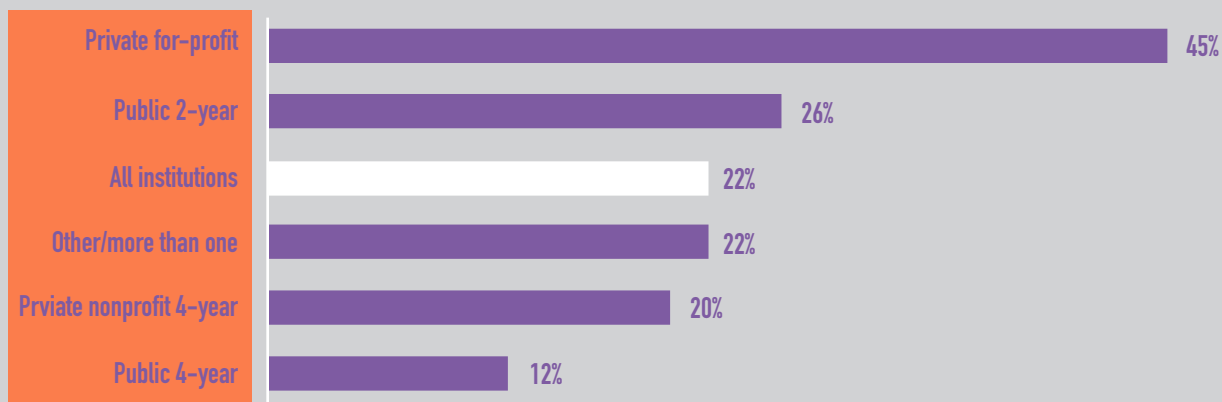


Source: Institute for Women's Policy Research analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015-16 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:16).

enrolled in private nonprofit four-year (13 percent) and other/more than one institution (10 percent).

While student parents are most likely to attend community colleges, their proportion of the overall student body varies by institution type. For-profit schools enroll the largest share of student parents compared with other institution types — 45 percent of all for-profit students are students with children and 39 percent are single mothers — followed by community colleges, whose student body is more than one-quarter student parents (26 percent; Figure 3).<sup>7</sup>

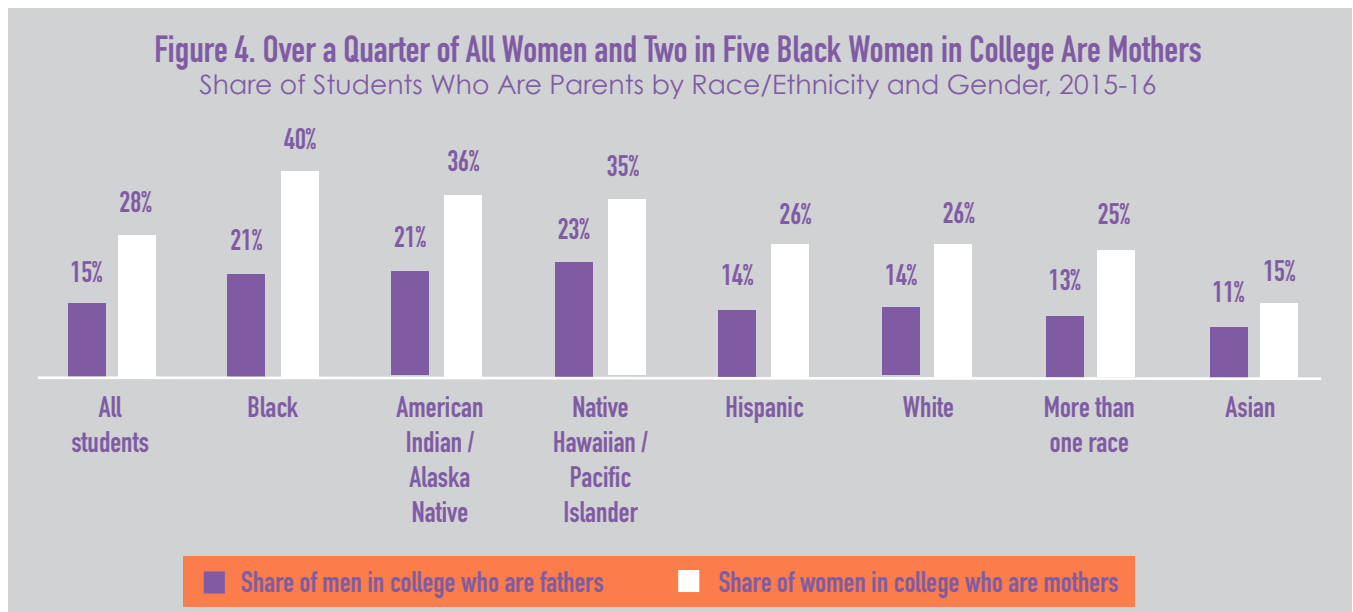
**Figure 3. Nearly Half of the For-Profit Student Body Are Parents**  
Share of Students Who Are Parents by Institution Type, 2015-16



Source: Institute for Women's Policy Research analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015-16 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:16).

Student parents are more likely than students without children to be students of color: 51 percent compared with 46 percent of students without children.<sup>8</sup> Looking across racial/ethnic backgrounds, Black college students are the most likely to be parents (33 percent), and Black women — two in five of whom are mothers — are more likely than women from other backgrounds to be raising children while in college (Figure 4).<sup>9</sup> American Indian/Alaska Native

and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students are also likely to be parents (29 percent and 30 percent, respectively), with more than one-third of women in both groups being mothers (Figure 4). Roughly one in five Hispanic students (21 percent), White students (21 percent), and students of more than one race (20 percent) are parents, as are 13 percent of Asian students.<sup>10</sup>



Source: Institute for Women's Policy Research analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015-16 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:16).

Student parents tend to be older while enrolled in college than their peers without children. Student parents' median age is 32, compared with 27 for independent students without children and 20 for dependent students.<sup>11</sup> Three in five student parents are 30 or older, roughly one-quarter are 24-29, and 15 percent are ages 15-23. Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander

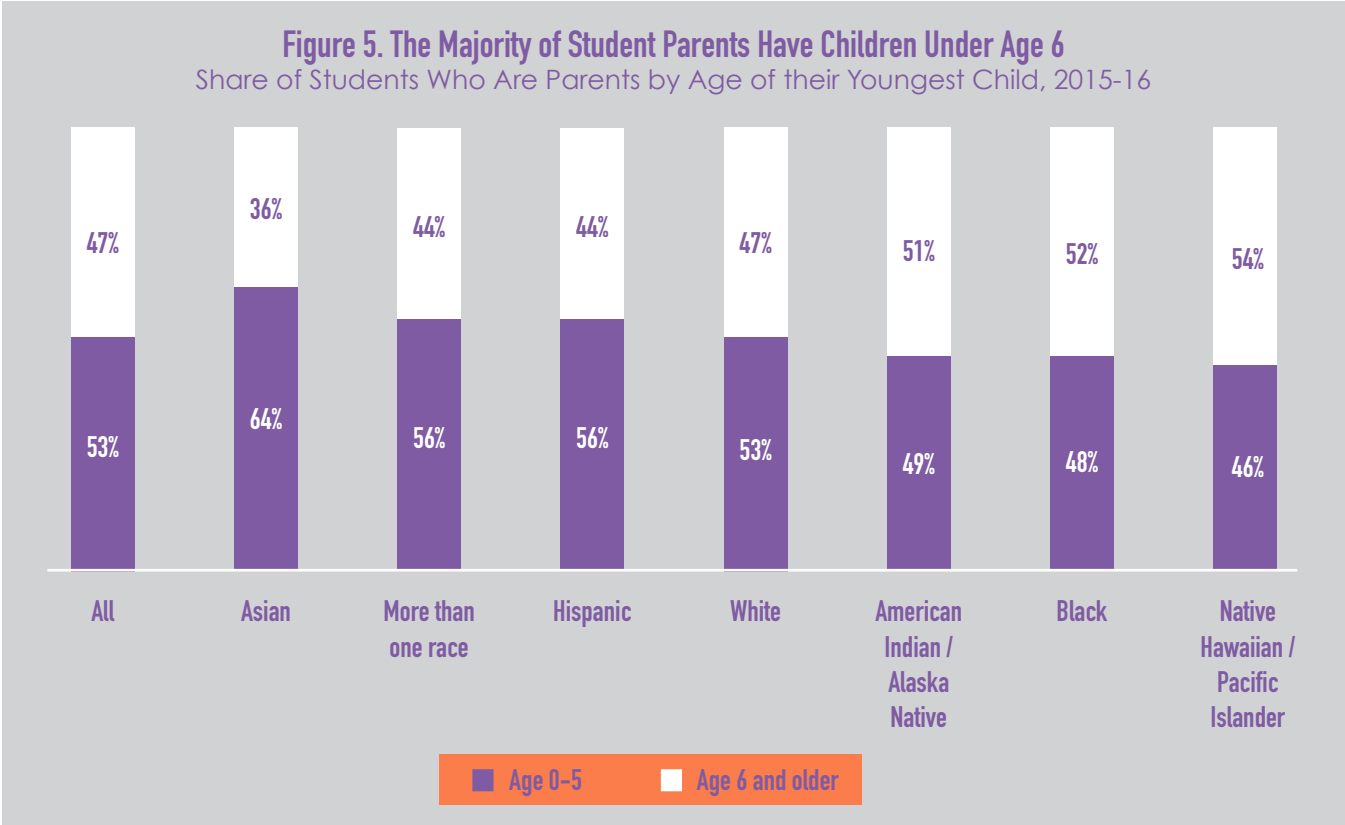


**“KEEPING MY HIGH GPA WILL PAY OFF FOR GETTING THE REST OF MY COLLEGE, FOR THE MOST PART, PAID FOR. I WANT TO KEEP AS MUCH DEBT OFF AS POSSIBLE.”**

- Student Parent, IWPR Survey of Women in Mississippi's Community and Technical College

student parents are more likely to be in their 30s or older (nearly three-quarters are in that age group) than other student parents, while Hispanic student parents are younger than parents of other racial/ethnic backgrounds (their median age is 30). Married student parents tend to be older than their single counterparts, with a median age of 34 and 30, respectively.

The large majority of student parents have one or two children (nearly 80 percent) and over half have children who are preschool-aged or younger (53 percent have children under age 6; Figure 5). Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native student parents are the most likely to have youngest children who are 6 or older (over half of each group). Asian student parents are most likely to have children ages 0-5 (64 percent), followed by student parents of more than one race (56 percent), Hispanic student parents (56 percent), and White student parents (53 percent; Figure 5).



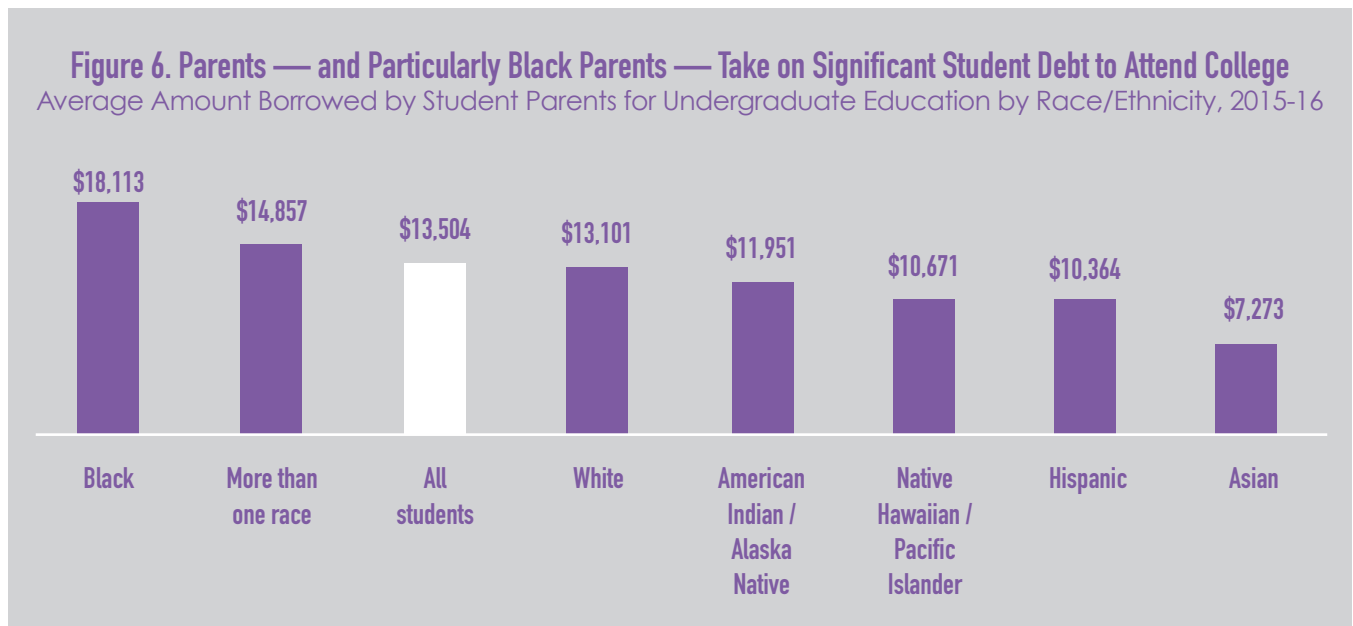
Source: Institute for Women’s Policy Research analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015-16 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:16).

### High College Debt Among Student Parents

Student parents’ family responsibilities, financial insecurity, and high enrollment in for-profit institutions can lead them to borrow more for college than other students.<sup>12</sup> Median debt among student parents enrolled in 2015-16 was more than two-and-a-half times higher than debt among students without children (\$6,500 compared with \$2,500, respectively).<sup>13</sup> Mothers, and especially single mothers, borrow more than other student parents and students without children. Student mothers enrolled in 2015-16 held a median \$8,300 in debt, and single mothers carried \$9,500 in debt. Median debt among single mothers in college was 2.7 times higher than median debt among women students without children (\$3,500).

Black student parents hold more student debt than parents or nonparents of every other racial/ethnic background. Black student parents borrow an average of \$18,100, compared

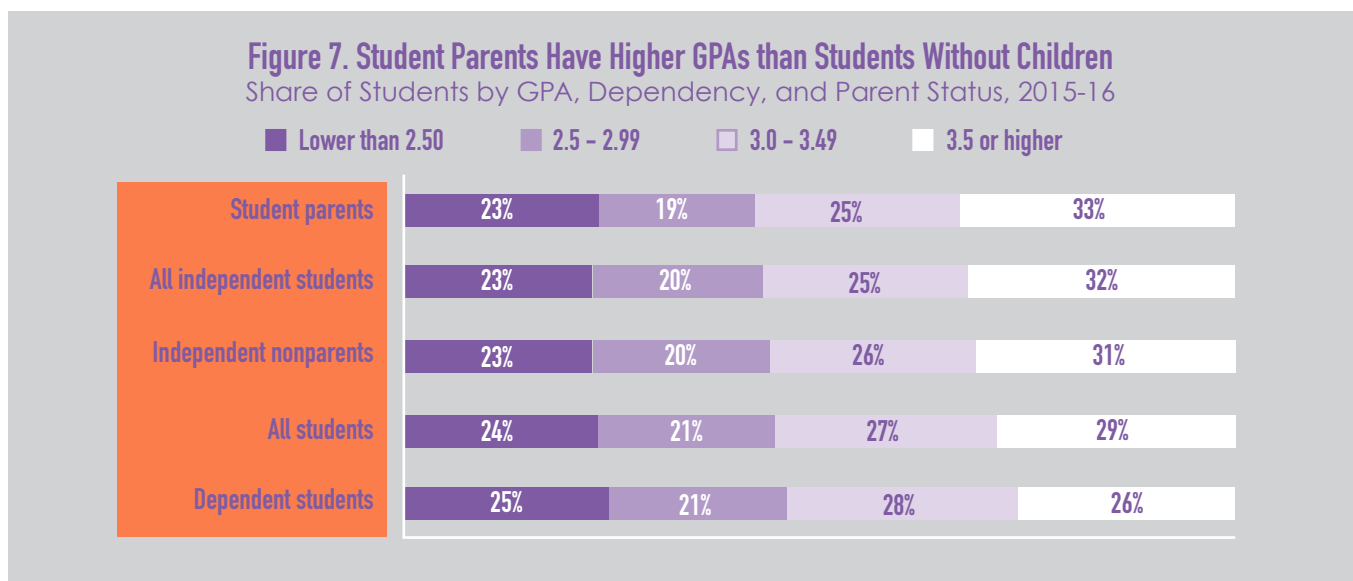
with an average of \$13,500 among all students, \$13,100 among White student parents, and \$10,400 among Hispanic student parents (Figure 6).



Source: Institute for Women's Policy Research analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015-16 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:16).

## Student Parents Earn Better Grades than Other Student Groups

Student parents are often motivated to pursue college by a desire to improve their children's lives.<sup>14</sup> While a range of obstacles can impede their ability to graduate on time, student parents achieve higher grade point averages (GPA) than other students.<sup>15</sup> One-third of student parents have a GPA of 3.5 or higher, compared with 31 percent of independent nonparents and 26 percent of dependent students (Figure 7).



Source: Institute for Women's Policy Research analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015-16 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:16).

## Promoting Student Parents' College Success

Given the large share of parents who are students of color, promoting college success among student parents is critical to improving racial/ethnic equity in higher education access and outcomes. It is also vital to achieving national and state goals to substantially increase the number of US adults with postsecondary credentials.<sup>16</sup> Ensuring student parents have access to affordable, quality, child care — which one study found more than tripled their likelihood of on-time graduation — in addition to supports like coaching, affordable family housing, emergency financial aid, mentoring and peer support, and physical and mental health care, would improve postsecondary success and economic security across generations.<sup>17</sup>

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The **Aspen Institute** is an educational and policy studies organization based in Washington, DC. Its mission is to foster leadership based on enduring values and to provide a nonpartisan venue for dealing with critical issues. As a policy program of the Institute, **Ascend at the Aspen Institute** is the national hub for breakthrough ideas and collaborations that move children and the adults in their lives to educational success, economic security, and health and well-being. We take a two-generation approach to our work, focusing on children and the adults in their lives together, and we bring a gender and racial equity lens to our analysis. In everything we do, we draw on the expertise and experience of families.

The **Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR)** conducts and communicates research to inspire public dialogue, shape policy, and improve the lives and opportunities of women of diverse backgrounds, circumstances, and experiences. The Institute's research strives to give voice to the needs of women from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds across the income spectrum and to ensure that their perspectives enter the public debate on ending discrimination and inequality, improving opportunity, and increasing economic security for women and families. The Institute works with policymakers, scholars, and public interest groups to design, execute, and disseminate research and to build a diverse network of individuals and organizations that conduct and use women-oriented policy research. IWPR's work is supported by foundation grants, government grants and contracts, donations from individuals, and contributions from organizations and corporations. IWPR is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization that also works in affiliation with the Program on Gender Analysis in Economics at American University.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR). 2018. Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015–16 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:16).

<sup>2</sup> Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR). 2018. Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015–16 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:16) and Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) Spring 2001 through Spring 2017, Fall Enrollment component.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR). 2018. Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2011–12 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:12).

<sup>4</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2016. "Unemployment rate nears prerecession level by end of 2015." Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. <<https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2016/article/unemployment-rate-nears-prerecession-level-by-end-of-2015.htm>> (accessed January 23, 2019). Jennifer Ma, Sandy Baum, Matea Pender, and CJ Libassi. 2018. *Trends in College Pricing 2018*. New York, NY: The College Board. <<https://trends.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/2018-trends-in-college-pricing.pdf>> (accessed November 9, 2018). Child Care Aware of America. 2018. *The U.S. and the High Cost of Child Care: A Review of Prices and Proposed Solutions for a Broken System*. Arlington, VA: Child Care Aware of America. <<https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/3957809/costofcare2018.pdf>> (accessed October 22, 2018). Sara Goldrick-Rab, Jed Richardson, Joel Schneider, Anthony Hernandez, and Clare Cady. 2018. *Still Hungry and Homeless in College*. Philadelphia, PA: Wisconsin HOPE Lab, University of Wisconsin-Madison. <<http://wihopelab.com/publications/Wisconsin-HOPE-Lab-Still-Hungry-and-Homeless.pdf>> (accessed August 16, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR). 2018. Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) analysis of data from NPSAS:16 and IPEDS Spring 2001 through Spring 2017. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, "Table 317.50. Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions That Have Closed Their Doors, by Control and Level." Washington, DC. <[https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17\\_317.50.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_317.50.asp)> (accessed November 21, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> IWPR. 2018. IWPR analysis of data from NPSAS:16 and IPEDS Spring 2001 through Spring 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> IWPR. 2018. IWPR analysis of data from NPSAS:16.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. Independent students have one or more of the following characteristics: at least 24 years old; married; a graduate or professional student; a veteran; a member of the armed forces; an orphan, in foster care, or a dependent or ward of the court since age 13; has legal dependents other than a spouse; an emancipated minor; or homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. Federal Student Aid. n.d. "Glossary."

<sup>12</sup> Barbara Gault, Lindsey Reichlin, Elizabeth Reynolds, and Meghan Froehner. 2014. "Campus Child Care Declining Even As Growing Numbers of Parents Attend College." Fact Sheet, IWPR #C425. Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research. <<https://iwpr.org/publications/campus-child-care-declining-even-as-growing-numbers-of-parents-attend-college/>> (accessed November 21, 2018). Lindsey Reichlin Cruse, Eleanor Eckerson, and Barbara Gault. 2018. "Understanding the New College Majority: The Demographic and Financial Characteristics of Independent Students and Their Postsecondary Outcomes." Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research. <<https://iwpr.org/publications/independent-students-new-college-majority/>> (accessed March 26, 2018). IWPR. 2017. "Single Mothers Overrepresented at For-Profit Colleges." Quick Figure, IWPR #C452. Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research. <<https://iwpr.org/publications/single-mothers-overrepresented-profit-colleges/>> (accessed November 6, 2017). Caren A. Arbeit and Laura Horn. 2017. *A Profile of the Enrollment Patterns and Demographic Characteristics of Undergraduates at For-Profit Institutions*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. <<https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017416.pdf>> (accessed November 21, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> IWPR. 2018. IWPR analysis of data from NPSAS:16.

<sup>14</sup> Cynthia Hess, Sylvia Krohn, Lindsey Reichlin, Stephanie Roman, and Barbara Gault. 2014. *Securing a Better Future: A Portrait of Female Students in Mississippi's Community Colleges*. Report, IWPR #C417. Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research and the Women's Foundation of Mississippi. <<https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/wpallimport/files/iwpr-export/publications/C417.pdf>> (accessed November 21, 2018).

<sup>15</sup> Barbara Gault, Lindsey Reichlin, Elizabeth Reynolds, and Meghan Froehner. 2014. "4.8 Million College Students Are Raising Children." Fact Sheet, IWPR #C424. Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research. <<http://www.iwpr.org/publications/pubs/4.8-million-college-students-are-raising-children>> (accessed September 8, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> Emily Parker, Lauren Sisneros, and Emily Pingel. 2016. *Free Community College: An Approach to Increase Adult Student Success in Postsecondary Education*. Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States. <<http://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/Free-Community-College-An-approach-to-increase-adult-student-success-in-postsecondary-education-.pdf>> (accessed November 21, 2018).

<sup>17</sup> Lindsey Reichlin Cruse, Barbara Gault, Jooyeoun Suh, and Mary Ann DeMario. 2018. "Time Demands of Single Mother College Students and the Role of Child Care in Their Postsecondary Success." Briefing Paper, IWPR #C468. Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research. <<https://iwpr.org/publications/single-mothers-college-time-use/>> (accessed August 22, 2018).