

# STRATEGIES AND INNOVATIONS THAT SUPPORT STUDENT PARENTS

Create a Family Friendly Campus



# INTRODUCTION

**Parents are a sizable but often overlooked student population in postsecondary systems.** The COVID-19 pandemic has placed new demands on all parents with young children and shed new light on the multiple demands of students who are parents. Seeking to strengthen supports for parents and boost overall completion rates, [Ascend at the Aspen Institute](#) launched the [Aspen Postsecondary Success for Parents \(PSP\) Initiative](#) in 2018. Ascend has engaged a diverse group of leaders, including parents, researchers, workforce development experts, college presidents, philanthropies, and policymakers, to develop strategies and innovations that better support parents as they achieve their postsecondary goals. Through our research activities and convenings, we have identified barriers that make it difficult for parents to complete their studies to the best of their abilities.

Students who are parents are mainly [women of color](#) who tend to face more systemic barriers to postsecondary completion than their white peers. In the economic shock caused by COVID-19, Black and Hispanic women experienced higher unemployment due to the sectors impacted; without income, continuing

their postsecondary journey is even more daunting. The long-term impact of COVID-19 is uncertain, but it is clear that we have an opportunity to rebuild our systems to better support those who are parenting young children. As colleges, service providers, policymakers, and advocates engage in relief and rebuilding measures, identifying and addressing the barriers students with dependent children face will support their desire to remain enrolled and not stop out.

Some of these barriers can appear minor yet addressing them can be impactful. For example, bookstores and resource centers that stay open beyond typical business hours can accommodate parents who also work. Or college campuses with dedicated spaces for children can change the cultural norms that stigmatize students who are parents. Many of the solutions shared below were generated by the experts who attended Ascend's PSP convenings, and they are meant to spark innovation of current policies and programs. Postsecondary leaders who understand their students' diverse roles and needs, and the systemic gaps, are better positioned to pursue additional strategies that support their institutional as well as national achievement goals.



# STRATEGY: CREATE A FAMILY FRIENDLY CAMPUS

**As of 2016, students who are parents made up 22 percent of the undergraduate population.**

- Ascend at the Aspen Institute and the Institute for Women's Policy Research

Institutions have much to gain by retaining students who are parents. As of [2016](#), students who are parents made up 22 percent of the undergraduate population. Investment in resources that improve the experience of students who are parents will improve the college experience for all students. With intentional engagement, college campuses can become a locus of community for “traditional” and “nontraditional” students alike.

Below are some specific approaches that take into account how campus culture, data and research, academic administration, and parent and child supports can all be part of a cohesive effort to help postsecondary institutions implement this strategy.

## GENERAL PARENT SUPPORTS

- Offer child care referral expertise on every campus or connect parents to free community-based expertise, such as resource and referral agencies.
- Create a one-stop support system for parents in colleges that intentionally focuses on common challenges and proactively partners and collaborates with public/private entities for financial and non-financial supports, such as a family resource center with on-campus tutoring and child care resources. (Example: [Los Angeles Valley College Family Resource Center](#))
- Offer emergency or backup child care options for the children of students who are parents. (Example: [Portland State University](#))
- Schedule an orientation or training for students who are parents so they can learn how to navigate family friendly resources and supports. (Example: [Central New Mexico Community College](#))
- Create a “311” type of delivery system that can direct students to the services available.
- Designate a member of the college's leadership team and/or within the offices of student affairs/student success to be the student parent liaison to help ensure the college is responsive to parent needs.
- Ensure all administrative offices and bookstores on campus are open until the last class of the day.
- Create a directory of student parent organizations on local campuses.
- Convene representatives from local colleges and student parent organizations to meet and compare strategies and create systems for referral.
- Encourage and incentivize all postsecondary institutions to share and better advertise their student parent services.
- Apply for Child Care Access Means Parents in School Program (CCAMPIS) and other federal and state early childhood funding to subsidize campus child care centers.

# REDUCING STIGMA AND BUILDING A WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT

- Take steps to make buildings on campus, especially restaurants, parks, and common areas, feel more like community and family gathering places.
- Make “building empathy” a core value of the culture of the university.
- Host family transition weeks at the start of semesters so that students can orient their families to their campus and schedules.
- Integrate family housing into campus housing to better include parents as part of the campus student body.
- Provide lactation rooms and family study rooms in every building.
- Co-locate student support services in family housing and dorms. (Example: [Misericordia Women with Children Program](#))
- Establish a “bring your kid to school” day; for example, a day where the college president hosts children of students.
- Include student parents in campus-wide diversity initiatives.

## DATA AND RESEARCH

- Convene two- and four-year college administrators to share data and strategies relevant to parents.
- Direct campuses to count and report outcomes for students who are parents and penalize bad performance to ensure accountability.
  - All colleges (especially community colleges) should collect data on parents.
  - Incorporate data on students who are parents into aggregate systems, such as the [National Student Clearinghouse](#).
  - Rank institutions on their success in serving student parents.
- Develop a certification system, similar to the LEED certification for sustainable buildings, for schools to pursue that creates a framework for their institutions to support success for students who are parents.

# ACADEMIA

- Align the schedule of college classes and internships with K-12 arrival and dismissal times and child care normal hours of operation.
- Improve class schedule flexibility, such as ensuring that each class is available at more than one time during the day/week.
- Identify promising programs that connect students who are parents with employers.

# RESOURCE

The [Family Friendly Campus Toolkit](#) is a no-cost, award-winning self-assessment system and guide for improving supports and outcomes for students who are raising children. Two- and four-year colleges and universities have used the toolkit's resources to locate and hear directly from student parents, raise awareness and increase campus dialogue about student parents and their issues, increase the visibility of existing supports, and improve and expand services. The toolkit includes many helpful resources, including multiple data-gathering tools, a list of recommended practices in use around the country, guidance for setting up a campus-wide task force, and a PowerPoint for disseminating findings and advocating for recommendations. It also suggests methods for documenting outcomes. At least 20 institutions have utilized the assessment, including Borough of Manhattan Community College; DePaul University; Eastern Kentucky University; George Mason University; Iowa State University; Los Angeles Valley College; The Ohio State University; University of California, Los Angeles; and University of New Mexico.



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- raise awareness about the strengths, needs, and challenges of student parents;
- increase visibility of existing supports and improve services; and
- develop new resources devoted to student parent success.



*"I cannot emphasize strongly enough how the self-assessment results from the Toolkit process catapulted our efforts into new territory for serving our student parents. We were able to use the data to finally get a CCAMPIS grant, after 10 years of trying, and also to see other areas of need for the first time."*

— Amy O'Keefe, Executive Director, Campus Alliance for Resource Education, Texas Woman's University



# STRATEGY IN PRACTICE

## STUDENT PARENT HELP CENTER



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

**Driven to Discover®**

**The [University of Minnesota's Student Parent HELP Center \(SPHC\)](#) is the longest standing program serving student parents in the nation.** For more than six decades, the SPHC has been assisting hundreds of mothers and fathers in achieving their dream of earning a college degree. Though its largest population of student parents has typically been single mothers, it has a long history of serving all parenting undergraduates: moms, dads, and adoptive siblings, and other relatives and beginning in 2016, graduate and professional students with children. The SPHC provides financial resources, a trained team of social workers, support networks, and child care to its student parents. It also engages the children of its students through programs like Gifts for Little Gophers and other family friendly events on campus. The SPHC serves up to 300 undergraduate and 300 graduate and professional student parents annually, who are served by the center until they complete their degree. It is funded by student affairs departmental resources, student fees, and various external grants and individual donations.

