

STRATEGIES AND INNOVATIONS THAT SUPPORT STUDENT PARENTS

Add High-Quality Non-Degree Pathways for Parents



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: ADD HIGH-QUALITY NON-DEGREE PATHWAYS FOR PARENTS

41 percent of workforce development boards identified parents as a target population in their local plans.

- The Urban Institute

Parents who want to improve their economic opportunity through education often encounter scheduling conflicts, child care challenges, and other major obstacles that high-quality, non-degree programs can help them overcome. Access to more flexible pathways creates opportunities for parents to develop the skills needed to participate in the workforce and obtain economic security while recognizing and respecting their role as parents. According to an Urban Institute [survey](#), 41 percent of workforce development boards identified parents as a target population in their local plans.



Below are some specific approaches providers, including community colleges, employers, community-based organizations/nonprofits, and more, can explore as they seek to innovatively help students who are parents successfully prepare for the workforce.

NON-TRADITIONAL PATHWAYS

- Establish fellowships for parents to enroll in alternative, non-degree pathways.
- Create employer-aligned, non-baccalaureate pathways that lead to a credential with labor market value. These pathways should have flexible hours and attendance requirements and come with supportive services, such as help accessing child care.
- Encourage employers to describe what skills they actually need so that parents can prepare accordingly.
- Explore [adult basic education](#) as an option (specifically, free programs that focus on teaching literacy and numeracy and that provide career and technical training for adult students).
- Consider competency-based models; explore how training at work can count toward a degree and offer college credit for training others, including allowing work portfolios and past work experience to be counted as credits toward college completion.
- Standardize ways for students to show proficiency in skills, such as via prior learning assessments, so that they can qualify for credits that count toward college completion.
- Strengthen oversight of institutions providing these pathways to protect students from predatory and/or low-quality programs.

ACADEMIC PATHWAYS

- Provide an accelerated path to a bachelor's degree.
- Offer competency-based education options to allow for flexibility in learning.
- Allow student parents to customize majors and college plans to fit their family situation.



STRATEGY IN PRACTICE



San Diego **Workforce** Partnership

Traditional workforce development programs focus on the individual without honoring the family conditions and obligations of their job seeker clients. By shifting to a two-generation approach, the [San Diego Workforce Partnership](#) aims for family economic security through family friendly training and employment while also working with partners to ensure that parent job seekers secure quality child care and work-friendly child support arrangements. The emerging integrated service model will be operationalized via [San Diego's Community Information Exchange](#), a platform for data sharing, referrals, case management, and tracking operated by the region's 2-1-1. To accelerate the work and raise the regional focus on child care as a key lever for inclusive economic growth, the Workforce Partnership recently released the [Workforce + Child Care](#) online experience, which provides a roadmap for better supporting student and working parents in the region.

Cover photo: Generation Hope Scholar and Ascend Parent Advisor Ariel Ventura-Lazo smiling with his daughter and son. Generation Hope is a nonprofit based in Washington, DC, providing wraparound, two-generation support to young parents in college and their pre-kindergarten little ones, and promoting student parents' college completion through national advocacy and direct technical assistance to colleges and universities.