

STRATEGIES AND INNOVATIONS THAT SUPPORT STUDENT PARENTS

Confirm Parenting Status and Assess Barriers to Completion



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: CONFIRM PARENTING STATUS AND ASSESS BARRIERS TO COMPLETION

Only 25% of community colleges surveyed track the parenting status of their students

- Achieving the Dream

In order to implement these strategies, institutions must first identify the population of need. [NASPA, Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education](#) reports that student affairs administrators need to have enough data “to best understand the adequate level and range of care needed for student parents.” What barriers do these students face? Use tools such as the [Family Friendly Campus Toolkit](#) to survey students and determine the appropriate next steps and use this report as a guide for potential interventions.

More than one in five college students — or 22 percent of all undergraduates — are parents, according to analysis of data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study. Of the 3.8 million students who are raising children while in college, roughly 2.7 million (70 percent) are mothers, and 1.1 million (30 percent) are fathers. The 1.7 million single student mothers enrolled as of 2015-2016 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. These data are focused on traditional college baccalaureate pathways; similar aggregate data on parenting status are needed for workforce and vocational pathways that occur outside of the higher education system.

The largest share of student parents is enrolled in community colleges (42 percent of all student parents are community college students). Similar shares of student parents attend private for-profit and public four-year institutions (18 percent and 17 percent, respectively), with the remainder enrolled in private, nonprofit four-year institutions (13 percent) and other/more than one institution (10 percent). Student parents are on every postsecondary campus across the country — in-person and online — but are rendered invisible by current data practices.



DATA COLLECTION

- Conduct a student survey — at multiple points in time during enrollment or registration, as parenting status can change often — requesting parental status disaggregated by additional demographic and descriptive data, such as:
 - Number and age of dependents under the age of 18
 - Marital status
 - Race/ethnicity
 - Gender
 - First-generation status
 - Use of on-campus or off-campus child care options
 - Pathway and interest at college — to transfer, complete a credential, learn new skills, etc.
- Use FAFSA data to capture an estimate of students with dependents.
- Link any survey or other method of data collection to student records so parenting status can be reviewed with academic performance and other demographic variables.
- Inquire about parenting status on applications and entrance portals.
- Incorporate data on students who are parents into aggregate systems like the National Student Clearinghouse.
- Review credential momentum and progression data, such as persistence, for parenting students.
- Host focus groups with parenting students to learn what student supports they use or need access to and whether there are any unnecessary roadblocks to their success.
- Track students who are parents in for-credit and non-credit coursework.

STRATEGY IN PRACTICE



Monroe Community College
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Monroe Community College (MCC) merges data on incoming and current students from the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) with information captured through its own student survey, administered before students are able to register for courses each semester.

While the FAFSA asks students about marital and parental status, MCC's survey dives deeper. Sample questions include but are not limited to: What is your primary educational objective? What are your plans for employment during this semester? Which of the following statements applies to you: I have children who are age 5 and younger and/or I'm expecting a baby; I have children who are age 6-18; I have children who are in both of the above age groups; I don't have any children in the above age groups. This information better informs MCC's policymaking and services, particularly for student parents. MCC links survey data with FAFSA, student records, and data collected on students who used the campus child care center to provide a full view of these students.

Dr. Mary Ann DeMario, a specialist at MCC's Institutional Research Office, found that student parents benefit greatly from the child care center on campus. Almost three-quarters (71.2 percent) of student parents who used the center not only had a higher fall-to-fall persistence rate, but also a higher on-time graduation rate than the 42 percent of student parents who did not use the center. According to DeMario, these findings "helped drive the first-ever increase in federal investment in student parents." They were highlighted as evidence to triple the funds for the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) grant from \$15 million to \$50 million.



The **Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS)** serves more than 300,000 students each year in dual-enrollment opportunities, liberal arts, and technical degree programs (associates degrees, technical diplomas); apprenticeship programs; and adult basic education. **For federal reporting efforts, WTCS tracks student demographic data (race, gender, age, single-parent status, etc.), enrollment information (program/degree, course enrollments), student success metrics (retention, successful course completion, graduation, etc.), and information on graduate outcomes (wages, employment, continuing education).**

Single mothers account for roughly 9 percent of WTCS program and adult education students and are a special population within the federal career and technical education system. Single mothers are more often economically disadvantaged, and across Wisconsin, 54 percent of the population lives in a child care desert, according to the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families. WTCS is increasing awareness of the needs of these students, collaborating, and sharing best practices across 16 technical colleges.