

STRATEGIES AND INNOVATIONS THAT SUPPORT STUDENT PARENTS

Identify Mental Health and Well-being Interventions



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: IDENTIFY MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING INTERVENTIONS

Anxiety is the most frequent concern among college students.

- Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors

Addressing mental health and trauma is a persistent concern for students who are parents. While more research is needed to understand the specific mental health needs of students who are parents, it is clear that mental health challenges—including depression and anxiety—can be a barrier to both academic and parental success. According to a [study](#) of college counseling center directors, anxiety continues to be the most frequent concern among college students (48.2 percent), followed by stress (39.1 percent), depression (34.5 percent), suicidal ideation (25.2 percent), specific relationship concerns (22.9 percent), family concerns (21.2 percent), interpersonal problems (18.8 percent), sleep problems (15.8 percent), and loneliness or social isolation (15.5 percent). Left untreated, depression and parental stress can impact a child's social and emotional development and is linked to toxic stress, which stunts children's future success. Mental health challenges can also prevent parents from continuing their education and gaining employment.



Below are some specific ways that postsecondary institutions can support students and their mental health and well-being so that they can continue their education and simultaneously be parents who can support their child's development.

INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGIES

- Ensure mental health providers within institutions are attuned to the needs and experiences of students who are parents.
- Add resources to assist students who are parents who are experiencing forms of domestic or intimate partner violence.
- Use existing technology to create an anonymous artificial intelligence chatbot for crisis services. (Example: [“Chatting with Chatbots”](#))
- Establish or enhance cultural competency, mental health, and trauma-informed care training for faculty and staff.
 - Make mental health counseling education mandatory for all administrators and faculty.
- Take steps to ensure connections between key support services, such as housing and health care, are seamless and cohesive.
 - For example, when parents enroll in one service, they get referred with no extra effort to other services they need. Ideally, these services are co-located.
 - Create a toolkit for parents, communities, and institutions so that all have a common understanding of opportunities, expectations, and seamless services.

- Curate a list of available crisis supports in a physical or digital package provided to all parents.
- Assign staff to be a centralized navigator of mental health supports.
 - Create a universal hotline for crises.
- Offer mental health supports and provisions to the whole family.
 - For example, provide times during major academic milestones and transition points when counselors and families “check in.”
- Allow students sick days for both physical and mental needs to accommodate family emergencies, and create spaces for child care outside of traditional hours to allow for a break from parenting duties. (Example: [University of Utah Parent Night Out](#))
- Partner with community providers to extend capacity to address mental health needs for students who are parents.

STRATEGY IN PRACTICE



jedfoundation.org

The JED Foundation is a nonprofit organization that protects emotional health and prevents suicide for the nation’s teens and young adults. Through its lead program, JED Campus, the organization guides participating colleges and universities through a comprehensive, four-year process to systematically increase protective factors and decrease risk factors for suicide and other mental health problems. The JED Campus process includes helping schools establish an interdisciplinary leadership team to oversee mental health planning; surveying students via the Healthy Minds Network survey from the University of Michigan; assessing current programs, policies, and systems; developing an action plan for enhancements; and providing technical assistance to help schools implement their plan. This evidence-based model is currently being implemented at more than 300 colleges and universities across the country, collectively serving 3.1 million students. Since the program began in 2014, participating colleges have shown significant progress in strengthening their policies, programs, and systems to promote mental health and reduce risks for substance misuse and suicide. In partnership with Ascend, JED will be developing a framework, to be released in 2021, for postsecondary systems to support the mental health of student parents.