

TAPPING THE TALENT OF STUDENT PARENTS

A PLAYBOOK FOR POSTSECONDARY LEADERS

ascend
aspen institute



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Ascend at the Aspen Institute would like to thank the following presidents and chancellors for their participation in the Postsecondary Leadership Circle:

Roslyn Clark Artis, President, Benedict College

Pam Eddinger, President, Bunker Hill Community College

Sue Ellspermann, President, Ivy Tech Community College

Mike Flores, Chancellor, Alamo Colleges District

Gregory Fowler, President, University of Maryland Global Campus and former President, Southern New Hampshire University Global Campus

Barry Gribbons, President, Los Angeles Valley College

Maria Harper-Marinick, Ascend Fellow and former Chancellor, Maricopa County Community College District

Carrie Hauser, President and CEO, Colorado Mountain College

Anne Kress, President, Northern Virginia Community College

Russell Lowery-Hart, President, Amarillo College

Eduardo Padrón, Ascend Fellow and President Emeritus, Miami Dade College

DeRionne Pollard, President, Nevada State College and former President, Montgomery College

Carol Probstfeld, President, State College of Florida, Manatee-Sarasota

Félix Matos Rodríguez, Ascend Fellow and Chancellor, City University of New York

Susan Mingo, President, Washington County Community College

Mark Mitsui, former President, Portland Community College

Juan Salgado, Chancellor, City Colleges of Chicago

William Serrata, Ascend Fellow and President, El Paso Community College

Laurel Vermillion, President, Sitting Bull College

Suzanne Elise Walsh, President, Bennett College

Daria Willis, Ascend Fellow, President, Howard Community College and former President, Everett Community College

Kathie Winograd, Ascend Fellow, Executive Director of Economic FORUM of Albuquerque and former President, Central New Mexico Community College

The authors would also like to recognize the contributions of the following staff and partners to this report: Denese Skinner, Vice President of Student Affairs, Amarillo College; Alicia D'Oyley, Dean of Enrollment Management and LifeMap, Bunker Hill Community College; Sherry Cleary, former Executive Director of the New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute and the University Dean of the Office of Early Childhood Initiatives, City University of New York; Tinker Duclou, Vice President and Campus Dean, Colorado Mountain College; Lucia M. Rodriguez, Director, Office of Student Success, El Paso Community College; Ja'Bette Lozupone, Director of Student Affairs, Montgomery College; Jaquelyn McNeil, Dean of Student Services, and Brittany Nielsen, Vice President for Student Services and Enrollment, State College of Florida, Manatee-Sarasota; Deborah Chapman, Consultant, Community Foundation of Sarasota County for participating in interviews; Alisa Cunningham, Kate Potterfield, and Kelly Rifelj for interviewing, writing, and editing; Jennifer Pocaí for editing; Meredith Hatch, Billie Jo Kipp, and Elizabeth Osche for external review; Gayle Bennett for copy editing; Substance for design; as well as Lexi Ivers for project management.

*Cover: 2023-2024 Ascend PSP Parent Advisor
Isis Patterson and her family*

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*2020-2021 Ascend
PSP Parent Advisor
Yoslin Amaya Hernandez
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LETTER TO THE POSTSECONDARY COMMUNITY

DEAR COLLEAGUES:

Building a future where every family has the opportunity to pass a legacy of prosperity and well-being from one generation to the next is a complex undertaking. There is no silver bullet to eliminate intergenerational poverty. That is why Ascend at the Aspen Institute has spent the last decade collaborating with diverse leaders across systems and sectors to advance the two-generation (2Gen) approach: pragmatic, innovative policies and practices that intentionally focus on children and their parents together. Back in 2018, we launched the Postsecondary Success for Parents (PSP) Initiative because we saw too many communities were missing a significant opportunity to embrace their full talent. We needed to create new pathways for student parents and reimagine postsecondary education with equity at the center. Student parents make up one in five undergraduates in the United States. We hear time and time again how their children motivate them to enroll and succeed, even earning higher GPAs than students without children. Another statistic: Over 12 million US adults with children have some college but no degree (Hensly, White, & Reichlin Cruse, 2021). What stands in the way of these motivated, talented students completing the degree they clearly want?

The answer could be many things: time, money, guidance — and institutional support. For postsecondary institutions that are already stretched thin as they navigate an evolving higher education landscape and adapt to meet the needs of today's students, adding more priorities may seem impossible. What this playbook aims to underscore is that addressing the needs of student parents should not be seen as “extra,” but as essential to accelerating progress on a range of institutional priorities, including completion, retention, access, and equity. And what's more, institutions don't have to start from scratch.

This playbook synthesizes learnings from PSP's Postsecondary Leadership Circle, a group of college presidents, to help deepen understanding of the student parent experience and how postsecondary institutions can best support parenting students and their families. We hope you will find the promising practices and institutional examples included to be informative and inspiring.

Higher education was not designed for parents, but as the field continues to evolve and adapt, there is opportunity to create space — not just in institutions, but in society — where parents are seen, where their experiences and expertise are valued, and where their success is celebrated. This Playbook offers a starting place for forward-thinking institutions as they navigate new terrain. Our work together is ongoing, and we hope you will share with us the ideas and practices that you have seen succeed at your institutions.

When more student parents earn postsecondary credentials, the impact is felt not only in their families, but also in their communities, the economy, and for generations to come.

Sincerely,



Anne Mosle

Vice President, Aspen Institute,
and Executive Director, Ascend at the Aspen Institute



Marjorie Sims

Managing Director, Ascend at the Aspen Institute



David Croom

Associate Director, Postsecondary Success for Parents,
Ascend at the Aspen Institute

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE PLAYBOOK

[Ascend at the Aspen Institute](#) created this playbook to share promising strategies and approaches for supporting student parents at institutions across the United States. Ascend is a catalyst and convener for diverse leaders working across systems and sectors to build intergenerational family prosperity and well-being by intentionally focusing on children and the adults in their lives together. We believe in the power of co-creation. We are a community of leaders — well-connected, well-prepared, and well-positioned — building political will that transforms hearts, minds, policies, and practices.

Since 2018, Ascend’s Postsecondary Success for Parents (PSP) Initiative has built a foundation for a national student parent movement. Ascend aims to establish an imperative to increase attainment rates for parents in postsecondary systems through solutions that are parent-informed, have potential to scale, and will lead to high-quality learning and family well-being. In 2020, Ascend established the [Postsecondary Leadership Circle \(Leadership Circle\)](#), a group of 20 college and university leaders who advise the PSP Initiative. Members of the Leadership Circle are spearheading innovative practices and family-friendly strategies on their campuses that advance postsecondary pathways for student parents across the country.

Each of the institutions developed an action plan to support student parents on their campuses. In their action plans, all Leadership Circle cohort members committed to collecting baseline data on student parents on campus; assessing institutional supports; identifying and tracking needs; building new or expanded institutional supports; and advocating for student parents more broadly.

This playbook showcases Leadership Circle members’ successes and lessons learned in implementing their action plans in order to highlight potential paths forward for other institutions.



Montgomery College Campus in Maryland

THE PROMISING PRACTICES

This playbook identifies five promising strategies that support the unique needs of student parents that emerged in interviews with Leadership Circle participants. The five strategies can be implemented individually or in combination, depending where an institution is in the work and the opportunities for and needs of student parents on their campus.



PROMISING PRACTICE 1

Identify, collect, and analyze data on student parents to understand who they are and what would support their success.

This includes:

- Using student data systems or other existing sources to identify student parents on campus;
- Engaging student parents directly in the data collection and analysis process through surveys or focus groups to get feedback on their experiences and needs;
- Analyzing data in collaboration with the Institutional Research (IR) office and other stakeholders; and
- Using data systems to get specific information into the hands of student parents.

Using data, in both the launch and ongoing implementation of student parent initiatives, can help support all other strategies by creating synergy, fostering buy-in among institution leaders, and strengthening the sustainability of new efforts. Promising Practice 1 is foundational and an integral part of the work.



PROMISING PRACTICE 2

Recognize student parent expertise as an essential part of co-creating solutions and strengthening connections on campus.

This includes:

- Inviting student parents to serve on task forces or advisory groups;
- Supporting student parents as ambassadors or peer advisors to engage other students; and
- Providing opportunities for student parents to build relationships on campus.

PROMISING PRACTICE 3



Refine messaging and communications to be inclusive of and welcoming to student parents.

This includes:

- Hosting all resources in one place for easy access by student parents;
- Showing the faces of student parents in marketing materials and on social media; and
- Bringing in student parents to provide feedback on communications.



PROMISING PRACTICE 4

Identify or create family-friendly spaces on campus where student parents can be both students and parents.

This includes:

- Providing physical locations on campus where parents can bring their children;
- Reserving spaces for student parent affinity groups; and
- Offering spaces on days, nights, and weekends to accommodate student parents' schedules.



PROMISING PRACTICE 5

Provide new, expanded, or targeted supports, services, and facilities for student parents on and off campus to advance their academic success.

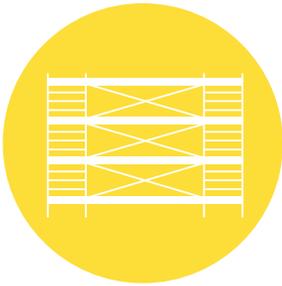
This includes:

- Addressing the challenges of child care for student parents; and
- Strengthening, and improving the awareness of, the services and facilities that student parents need.



2020-2021 Ascend PSP Parent Advisor Drayton Jackson and his family

THE SCAFFOLDING



Interviews for this playbook suggest that effective strategies must be developed and work within the scaffolding of policies, practices, and planning that institutions rely on for structure and sustainable growth. While “quick wins” that start with existing resources can be a catalyzing place to start, a focus on system-wide and long-term structural shifts is essential.

A systemic approach to accomplishing this includes the following underlying elements:

LEADERSHIP

Work with top leadership to make supporting student parents an institutional priority, including getting the support of the president and other leaders related to student parent success and instruction.

CENTRALIZED RESPONSIBILITY

Create a committee or task force that includes diverse offices (e.g., student services, facilities, institutional research, etc.) as well as faculty and students to secure cross-campus commitment.

FAMILY-FRIENDLY POLICIES

Review and revise institutional policies related to student parents as needed, including policies on minors on campus, to remove barriers to student parent success.

FACULTY

Engage faculty in student parent efforts to create inclusive and supportive classrooms.

IDENTIFICATION OF EARLY DATA

Collect data on student parent demographics in the short term to generate buy-in from internal and external audiences and lay a foundation for future action.

EXISTING RESOURCES

Start with existing resources, such as staff time and internal changes, to quickly begin increasing student parent supports.

NEW RESOURCES

After using existing resources and collecting data on initial successes, reach out for new funding, partnerships, and resources, and make the case for additional internal resources or staff to sustain efforts.

EXTERNAL PARTNERSHIPS

Leverage external partnerships, including philanthropic partners, community-based organizations, early childhood education providers, government agencies, and employers, to help maximize impact, expand the network of champions, and develop relationships that keep partners accountable for progress. A systemic approach creates important feedback loops, generates cross-campus buy-in, and builds momentum for student parent initiatives.

The various underlying elements function as the scaffolding on which the strategies to support student parents are built. The intentional use of data is both a key promising practice for designing supports for student parents and an essential component of the scaffolding that sustains the initiative.

INTRODUCTION

Students with dependent children comprise about 20 percent of all undergraduates in the United States (Ascend at the Aspen Institute & Institute for Women’s Policy Research, 2019). In 2017-18, majorities of student parents were female, students of color, age 30 or above, and/or single, divorced, or widowed. While student parents were enrolled at all types of postsecondary institutions, a significant proportion attended community colleges (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The proportion of undergraduates who are student parents decreased by 15 percent between 2011-12 and 2015-16, partially due to the rising costs of college, child care, and housing as well as declining unemployment rates and the closure of many private for-profit institutions (Ascend at the Aspen Institute & Institute for Women’s Policy Research, 2019).

The full potential of a full one-fifth of undergraduate students in the United States remains unrealized.

Given the overall undergraduate enrollment decreases during the COVID-19 pandemic (NSC, 2021), student parents may have faced additional barriers to enrolling or remaining in college during this period. Even before the pandemic, student parents were often struggling to balance their school responsibilities with work and family life. A 2020 survey (Rothwell, 2021) of college students who were caregivers found that over 40 percent of student parents had considered stopping classes in the previous six months; top reasons cited for considering stopping out were child care responsibilities (37 percent), cost of attendance (27 percent), and COVID-19 (25 percent). As Bunker Hill Community College President Pam Eddinger noted recently, the pandemic both exacerbated the situation and revealed student parents to the campus community:

The idea of having children appear on your Zoom meetings, having child care being a big piece of the conversation ... becoming much more evident both in the narrative and in visual images ... helped the sympathetic nature of dealing with the issue of supporting student parents. ... I think what happened during COVID was there was sort of a crack of lightning in the night, and you can see all of the things that are not working.

Colleges and universities can do more to support this significant portion of the nation’s postsecondary population. Too often, student parents “face obstacles related to childcare, time poverty, and economic insecurity that can disrupt their postsecondary journeys” (Gault et al., 2020). These students are attending college and caring for children — often in addition to other responsibilities, such as work and eldercare — and despite their best efforts, they frequently are struggling with these multiple challenges. At the same time, student parents tend to attain higher grades than other students (Ascend at the Aspen Institute & Institute for Women’s Policy Research, 2019) and be optimistic about earning a degree despite the obstacles they face (Williams, 2022), so it is also important to promote their successes.

Recognizing this gap between the needs of student parents and the unique barriers they face, some postsecondary institutions see an opportunity to help a sizable portion of the nation's working adults obtain credentials and grow their talent. These institutions are listening closely to student parents to understand their needs and aspirations and implement supports for credential completion. Several initiatives now focus on work that supports student parents.¹



WE DON'T THINK ABOUT [A STUDENT'S] LIFE OUTSIDE OF THE COLLEGE, UNFORTUNATELY, NOT AS MUCH AS WE NEED TO.

I'm glad that the trend is now, everywhere nationally, to think about students, of the whole student, not just them in the classroom but what they have to face as far as their families, their jobs, housing."

- El Paso CC

In this playbook, we share examples of promising practices and strategies from members of Ascend's Postsecondary Leadership Circle.

About Ascend and the Postsecondary Leadership Circle

In 2010, in the aftermath of the Great Recession, Anne Mosle founded Ascend at the Aspen Institute in partnership with philanthropic leaders to spark and spread breakthroughs in how we achieve intergenerational family prosperity and well-being. Since then, Ascend has propelled a movement of parents, practitioners, policymakers, philanthropists, and researchers advancing two-generation (2Gen) approaches in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico as well as across the globe in Ireland, Rwanda, and Guatemala — a movement now reaching 12 million families. Ascend's Postsecondary Success for Parents (PSP) Initiative² is a multi-year effort to raise awareness of and share recommendations to improve outcomes for student parents. The PSP Initiative has built a foundation for the student parent movement.

¹ For example, Generation Hope's FamilyU Cohort (generationhope.org/familyucohort); ATD/Community College Women Succeed initiative (achievingthedream.org/advocacy/community-college-women-succeed/); College Success for Single Mothers (collegetransition.org/career-pathways/featured-projects/single-mothers-success/); Single Mother Learners (eddesignlab.org/project/singlemomssuccess/).

² ascend.aspeninstitute.org/postsecondary-success-for-parents/

Campus Toolkit and other resources to jumpstart or complement their own initiatives. The Toolkit (familyfriendlycampus.org) is a self-assessment system that guides colleges and universities as they strive to improve supports and resources for student parents and is an essential companion to this playbook, as it discusses some of the detailed ways in which institutions can begin, or move forward with, their student parent initiatives.



State College of Florida, Manatee-Sarasota;
Stephen J. Korcheck Student Services Center

Ascend produced five *Strategies and Innovations* briefs,³ which offer specific recommendations and emerging best practices. The series served as an early resource for the Leadership Circle and covered collecting and analyzing student parent data, leveraging state and federal policy opportunities, financial support, mental health and wellness, family-friendly campuses, high-quality non-degree pathways, and social capital.

Ascend also created formal and informal spaces for Leadership Circle cohort members to engage as peers and learn from one another about potential solutions to address student parent retention and completion rates, COVID-19, state and local policy, and more.

For example, Ascend hosted three strategy convenings for the cohort and monthly peer learning and technical assistance sessions for the student success leads to deepen understanding about resources and strategies to support student parents. Student success leads were staff from various divisions, such as student affairs or early childhood development, who led efforts at their institution or system under the guidance of the president. Additionally, Ascend provided one-on-one assistance to Leadership Circle cohort members in developing their action plans and leveraged expertise and tools from the PSP National Advisors and Ascend Network partners.

³The Strategies and Innovations briefs are available at ascend.aspeninstitute.org/new-briefs-strategies-and-innovations-that-support-student-parents/.

In their action plans, all Leadership Circle cohort members committed to collecting baseline data on student parents on campus; assessing institutional supports; identifying and tracking needs; building new or expanded institutional supports; and advocating for student parents more broadly. The institutions are in varying stages of implementing their action plans, but they already reveal learnings for other institutions.

To implement their institutional action plans, each Leadership Circle member selected one or more student success leads to serve as facilitators of their college's student parent support activities. Seven of the student success leads at institutions that are members of the Leadership Circle participated in interviews for this playbook, as well as staff from coordinating departments (e.g., IR or Student Services).

The appendix of the playbook provides brief profiles of the participating institutions, including basic information and data about each school and project activities. Unless cited otherwise, the information provided throughout the playbook derives from the interviews and the institutional action plans.⁴

PARTICIPATING COLLEGES INCLUDE:

AMARILLO COLLEGE

Amarillo, Texas

BUNKER HILL COMMUNITY COLLEGE

(BUNKER HILL CC)

Boston, Massachusetts

CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK (CUNY)

New York, New York

COLORADO MOUNTAIN COLLEGE

Glenwood Springs, Colorado

EL PASO COMMUNITY COLLEGE

(EL PASO CC)

El Paso, Texas

MONTGOMERY COLLEGE

Montgomery County, Maryland

STATE COLLEGE OF FLORIDA (SCF)

Manatee and Sarasota Counties, Florida

⁴Note that numbers of undergraduates in the institutional profiles are derived from College Navigator (nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/) and do not include non-credit students.

ABOUT THIS PLAYBOOK

The goal of this playbook is to share current and promising strategies for supporting student parents based on the emerging experiences of the participating Leadership Circle institutions. As noted in the introduction, the [Family Friendly Campus Toolkit](#) offers a systematic guide for improving supports and outcomes for student parents, and the participating institutions relied heavily on the toolkit when developing and implementing their action plans. This toolkit showcases successes and lessons learned from colleges that have used it — and it highlights potential paths forward for other institutions.

The examples and insights that follow are grounded in the unique contexts of each institution but provide important information that is applicable to other postsecondary institutions. Five strategies are identified to help inform institutional efforts to increase understanding of and support for student parents (see Figure 1). The institutional examples of

promising practices and key strategies are designed to complement the Family Friendly Campus Toolkit and bring to life the experiences of each institution and the student parents they serve. The strategies can also be viewed within the context of 2Gen principles (see section on 2Gen approaches on 4).

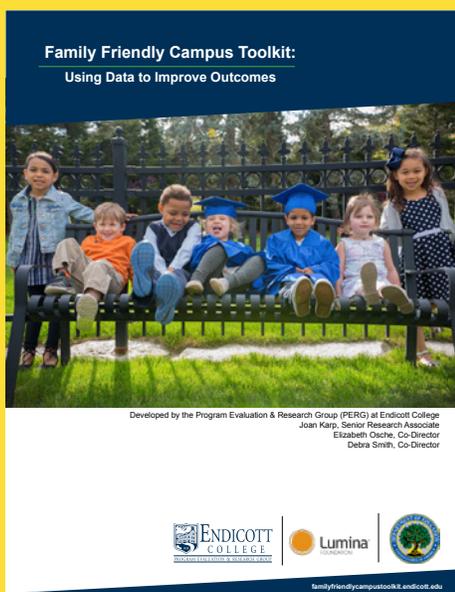
Figure 1. Core Promising Practices for Supporting Student Parents



The five strategies can be implemented individually or holistically, depending where an institution is in the work and the opportunities and needs of student parents on their campus. It is worth noting, however, that Promising Practice 1, regarding the utilization of data in both the launch and ongoing implementation of student parent initiatives, can help support the other strategies, create synergy, foster buy-in, and enable sustainability; in this regard, Promising Practice 1 is considered foundational and an iterative part of the work.

The next sections of the playbook describe the experiences of participating institutions and provide examples of how these institutions developed and implemented the five strategies. The promising practices and key strategies should not be considered in isolation but rather integrated across the institution, keeping in mind each institution's goals and context.

Subsequently, the playbook describes examples of how institutions can build a systemic approach to the work. Finally, the playbook provides foundational and structural guidelines intended to help institutions make their own implementation efforts sustainable.



Family Friendly Campus Toolkit

The Family Friendly Campus Toolkit (familyfriendlycampus.org/) can be used to identify existing campus resources and learn about recommended practices, including gathering data from and about student parents and developing an action plan to better support them. The Toolkit also includes examples of how the components can be used, plus a dissemination guide with fact sheets and other tools to share with internal and external stakeholders (Karp et al., 2020).

The student success leads from each institution provided thoughts on some of the ways in which they used the Toolkit to implement their student parent initiatives. For example, the Bunker Hill CC student success lead explained, “We literally went through all of the exercises, page by page, and it developed a good structure for us. ... We took our time, and we were really thoughtful about how we shared out the data.” According to the El Paso CC student success

lead, “Following the family-friendly Toolkit was very helpful because it’s such a big project, and the Toolkit breaks it down into [clear steps]: getting to know your institution and getting to know what’s available, getting to know your students, doing the survey, doing the focus groups [and so on].” In addition, the Montgomery College student success lead said: “I think the [most beneficial part of the Toolkit] was giving structure for the plan and helping us narrow down where we wanted to focus — and doing that assessment to understand where we had gaps, where things are highly fragmented, and where we have certain things in place.”



PROMISING PRACTICE 1

IDENTIFY, COLLECT, AND ANALYZE DATA ON STUDENT PARENTS TO UNDERSTAND WHO THEY ARE AND WHAT WOULD SUPPORT THEIR SUCCESS.

As reflected in the interviews with the Leadership Circle and in the Family Friendly Campus Toolkit, it is important to recognize student parents as a population with unique barriers and experiences (Karp et al., 2020; Hatch & Toner, 2020). However, most institutions do not currently track the parenting status of their students (Ascend at the Aspen Institute, 2020a). Thus, an essential first step is to identify the student parents on campus.⁵ Student parent identification generally occurs in collaboration with institutional research (IR) and other offices, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches to better understand their needs. Including student parents in the data collection and analysis through focus groups, feedback on surveys, or other mechanisms can help identify effective strategies and supports.

KEY STRATEGY

Use student data systems or existing sources to identify student parents on campus.

Institutions have used several approaches to identify student parents: admissions data, data from the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and institutional survey data. The approaches are not mutually exclusive, and using a combination can help improve identification.

Approach 1 - Admissions data. Institutions can give student parents the opportunity to disclose parental status during the admissions process (Karp et al., 2020). This approach may involve modifying existing data systems, such as adding a question to the application or entrance portal to allow student parents to self-identify. Bunker Hill Community College (Bunker Hill CC) and Colorado Mountain College, for example, added an optional checkbox. However, many institutions may not be able to use this approach; as noted by City Colleges of New York (CUNY), with its 25 campuses, adding a field to the system application can be difficult.

⁵ Note that there have been recent legislative efforts to mandate or encourage the collection of data on student parents. For example, Illinois passed the Student Parent Data Collection Act (ilga.gov/legislation/BillStatus.asp?DocNum=267&GAID=16&DocTypeID=SB&SessionID=110&GA=102#:~:text=Creates%20the%20Student%20Parent%20Data,the%20student%20is%20a%20parent) and Oregon passed legislation that allows colleges to update forms to include questions for students to identify as parents (olis.oregonlegislature.gov/liz/2021R1/Measures/Overview/SB564).

Approach 2 - FAFSA data. Institutions have also used FAFSA data and/or state financial aid application data to identify students with dependent children, which can create an initial estimate. However, not all student parents apply for financial aid, so this approach may underestimate the student parent population. At Amarillo College, about 80 percent of students apply for financial aid, so the college felt this approach would capture most student parents. But at the State College of Florida (SCF), the FAFSA completion rate is relatively low, as is true across the state of Florida, so this approach was less useful.

Approach 3 - Survey data. Institutions also have surveyed all students on campus, allowing students to *self-identify* as parents, or they have initially used FAFSA information to identify student parents and then surveyed the student population to find additional parents who had not applied for aid. For example, Montgomery College staff used the

information they could get from the FAFSA and the Maryland State Financial Aid Application to develop and send out a student parent identification questionnaire to the entire credit student population, plus some subsets of students in workforce development and continuing education.

For all of these approaches, once student parents are identified, other student data systems within the institution, such as those in admissions, the registrar, financial aid, student services, facilities, and other campus offices, can be used to obtain data on student demographics, attendance, major, academic status, enrolled courses, financial aid receipt, the supports and services they are using, and more. In addition, institutions might consider incorporating data from external systems, such as the National Student Clearinghouse, which can help round out data on student progression, transfer, and credential completion (Ascend at the Aspen Institute, 2020a).



2023-2024 Ascend PSP Parent Advisor Nicole Alkire Grady and her family

KEY STRATEGY

Engage student parents directly through surveys or focus groups to capture a fuller picture of their experiences and needs and to deepen relationships with them.

Once institutions identify student parents, it is useful to gain deeper insights from the student parents themselves using surveys, focus groups, or interviews. These tools are flexible in terms of both quantitative and qualitative data collection and can round out knowledge of student parent experiences. According to an Amarillo College student success lead, “Students will tell you what they need.”

Approach 1 - Surveys. Many institutions used surveys to better understand student parents’ experiences and perceptions. City Colleges of New York (CUNY)’s survey came out of its student parent task force and to CUNY’s surprise, had a high response rate. The survey revealed that “While financial challenges were the largest barrier to [student parents’] academic success, a good second was stress, anxiety, and depression. Childcare [was] a third runner-up.” The survey also provided space for student parents to input narrative data or request a phone call from CUNY staff. According to CUNY staff, of the 40,000 students surveyed, about 900 student parents wrote that they would like to be contacted by email; further, 35 students requested and received a phone call. Bunker Hill CC provided an incentive for survey participation, which it felt helped lead to a relatively high response rate and was received well by students.

Approach 2 - Focus groups and interviews.

Focus groups and interviews with student parents can offer information on what supports they are using or need to access (Ascend at the Aspen Institute, 2020a). Several institutions hosted focus groups for student parents to provide feedback on the challenges they face, their needs, and how the institution could help. El Paso CC, for example, counted on its TRIO program (specifically, the Student Support Services) to recruit participants for focus groups. Colorado Mountain College asked some student parents who had taken its survey to also participate in a focus group and then added several alumni to provide additional perspective. The SCF noted the usefulness of the focus groups when asking students about their needs: “Sometimes they don’t realize just how much information they can provide for us. I think that’s the first step: ask them.”



WHAT DID YOU FIND THAT WORKED TO RECRUIT STUDENTS? WHEN THEY GOT THERE, WHAT WERE THE THINGS THAT THEY SAID THEY REALLY NEEDED?

We’re trying to create that hub of support, not just for our students, but for the people who are running the actual programs.”
- State College of Florida

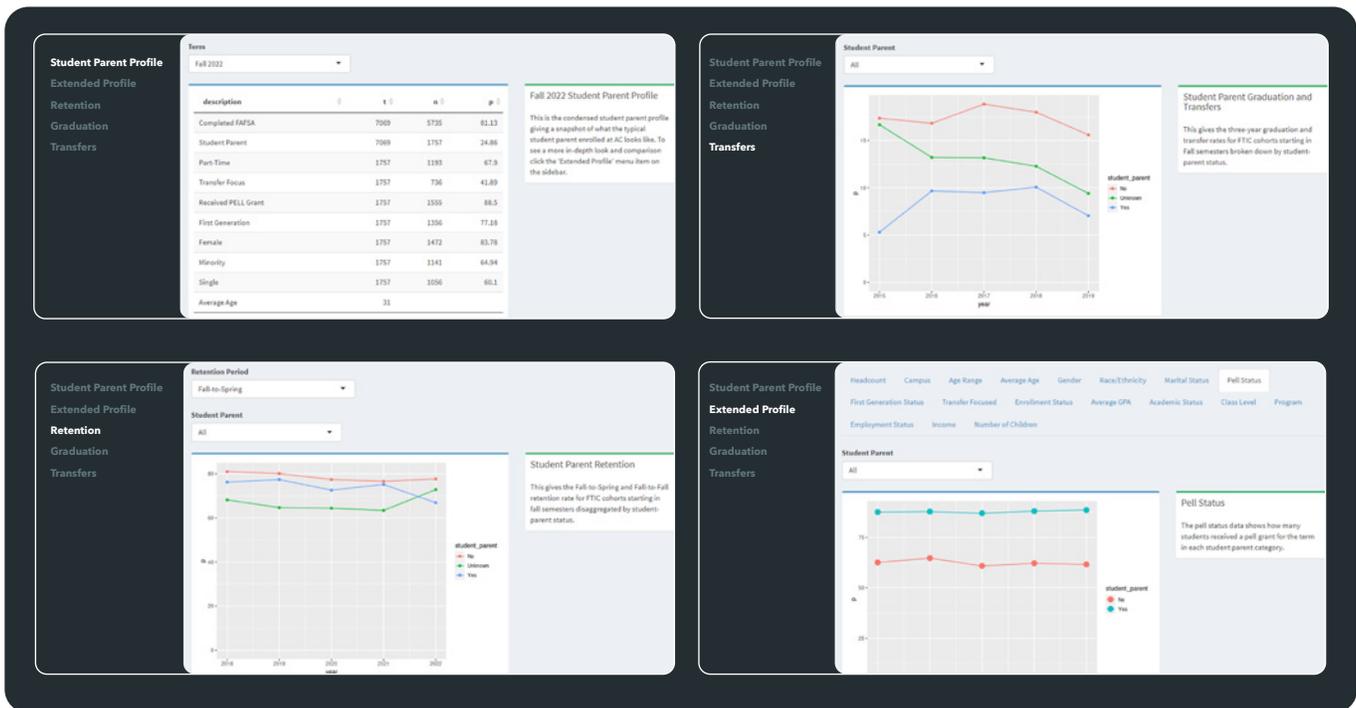
KEY STRATEGY

Analyze data in collaboration with the IR office and other stakeholders.

When analyzing the data to identify and target the specific needs of student parents, it is important to engage and build a relationship with the IR office (Karp et al., 2020). The IR office can help disaggregate the data across a range of important metrics (e.g., demographics, enrollment and persistence, academic standing, and use of support services), which can contextualize the findings before making new interventions or targeting existing resources. For example, parents with young children may have different needs, such as child care, than parents of older children. The IR office can also help develop dashboards that visualize the data to help internal and external audiences understand who student parents are and what they need to succeed.

For example, the Amarillo College student success lead felt the institution “probably move[d] faster than most other schools because [of] our data analytics team ... [which] got on board immediately.” The college merged data from institution data systems (such as enrollment records) with FAFSA data (used to identify student parents) to create a dashboard to compare past and current student parents to non-parents. The dashboard includes a range of variables, such as age of children under 18, gender, first generation or not, race/ethnicity, income, work experience, marital status, grades, coursework, persistence, student progress measures, utilization of support services, child care used, and campus attended. Individuals from different offices at the college then came together to discuss their short-, medium-, and long-range goals.

Figure 2. Amarillo College’s Student Parent Data Dashboard



Bunker Hill CC plans to add “student parents” as a filter on its dashboard so this population can be incorporated into its institutional reports and other analyses. Some interesting insights have already emerged from its survey of student parents: three-quarters of the college’s student parents are first-generation college students, and student parents have higher GPAs and persistence rates than students overall. Once all of its student parents are identified, Colorado Mountain College will be able to use its data on enrollment, persistence, and completion to better understand stop-out patterns, course failures or withdrawals, and other information to target resources to where they are most needed. As the student success lead noted, “Once we had a sense of those things, we could look in and say, is this a financial thing? Is this a child care thing? Is this a time-deficit thing? Why are we losing you at these particular times, and then what can we do about it?”

KEY STRATEGY

Use data systems to target specific and relevant information on resources and other supports to student parents.

Identifying student parents in institutional student data systems can make it easier to get them targeted information about available services. For example, Amarillo College can use its dashboard software to email materials to specific groups of student parents. Bunker Hill CC has added a question to its application for student parents to self-identify and wants to put that information into its new customer relationship management system to connect directly with student parents. The integration will offer more opportunities to target student parents with communications about resources specific to their needs. The system also can incorporate key data points into communication materials. In its upcoming recruitment plan, Bunker Hill plans to target both student parents and adult learners with specific recruitment activities, such as a student parent orientation managed by student affairs staff.

Student parent Cheyenne Brady and her family





PROMISING PRACTICE 2

RECOGNIZE STUDENT PARENT EXPERTISE AS AN ESSENTIAL PART OF CO-CREATING SOLUTIONS AND STRENGTHENING CONNECTIONS ON CAMPUS.

Campus environments can make student parents feel welcome and experience a sense of belonging. A number of institutional practices can help make that a reality, from including student parents in institutional or peer leadership positions to providing opportunities for student parents to connect and engage with one another. Also, institutions can use qualitative and quantitative data to help inform and contextualize student parent voices. For example:

KEY STRATEGY

Include student parents on task forces or advisory groups.

Beyond hosting focus groups or issuing surveys, including student parents on task forces, advisory groups, or other convening opportunities can not only identify their needs but also what they offer to the campus community. Student parents should be included in decision-making through representation in meetings and committees and supported in advocacy roles (Karp et al., 2020). This can build bridges from student parents to other community stakeholders. In some cases, these students can become “champions” who can advocate for new and revised policies or services on campus.

For example, City Colleges of New York (CUNY) has a student parent task force composed primarily of student parents, with support from faculty and student services staff, and the SCF’s Parents Initiative and Montgomery College’s ASCEND Parent Initiative Taskforce both include student parents. A representative from Montgomery

College suggested including alumni on task forces; an student parent alumna from the college shared experiences that contributed to discussions about effective supports.

KEY STRATEGY

Use student parents as ambassadors or peer advisors to engage other students.

Student parents can also become involved in a formal role, such as leading outreach activities or becoming peer advisors and tutors for other student parents. Creating such a role can leverage student parents’ existing knowledge and campus experience. Bunker Hill CC, for example, is planning to hire student parent ambassadors to act as mentors and engage with their peers, and the college is also searching for funding to support a coordinator to manage the program and create academic coaching or advising opportunities. The college also makes sure that student parents are represented in the pool of student engagement leaders that assist with orientation during the summer.

KEY STRATEGY

Provide opportunities for student parents to build relationships on campus.

Student parents need access to networks where they can create the social capital and skills needed to successfully navigate the path toward a postsecondary credential (Ascend, 2020c). Focus groups and other outreach efforts suggest that many student parents feel isolated or lonely and would like to be connected to other student parents who share their experiences. Student parents want to feel a sense of belonging and enjoy the support a community can provide.

El Paso CC's survey of students found that student parents did not know other student parents, despite

the fact that the survey also found that half of the college's students were parents. "It was very eye-opening that when we asked students whether they knew other student parents, for the most part, they did not," said a college representative. The college is hoping to create a student parent resource center on each campus that could help foster relationships and an advisory group of parents to guide opportunities to bring student parents together. Montgomery College established an affinity group, the student parent alliance, so that student parents could meet their peers. Colorado College also hopes to create a campus community of student parents for study groups or just moral support after surveys of student parents highlighted their desire to connect with their peers.



BEING PART OF THIS TASK FORCE REALLY CLARIFIED FOR US THAT... OUR FOCUS ON [STUDENT PARENTS] COULD REALLY BE A GAME-CHANGER,

not just for individuals, for them, of course, but also for us as an institution when it comes to recruitment, retention, persistence, graduation." - El Paso Community College



El Paso Community College's Valley Verde Campus



PROMISING PRACTICE 3

REFINE MESSAGING AND COMMUNICATIONS TO BE INCLUSIVE OF AND WELCOMING TO STUDENT PARENTS.

Institutions need to publicize all supports and policies pertinent to student parents so that they know what's available, how to access the resources, and how to navigate both on-campus and off-campus services (Karp et al., 2020). Data collection efforts can complement messaging efforts by targeting student parents, contacting them to learn about their needs, matching them to resources, and promoting key facts about student parents in communication campaigns.

KEY STRATEGY

Put all resources in one place for easy access

This could be a centralized virtual or in-person location. Virtual locations can include websites or other hubs that point students to available resources. In-person locations would ideally bring all services together in one building. Campus maps showing where offices or facilities are located are also helpful. Interviewees said that student parents often do not know about the services or supports that exist to help them, or they do not have the time to go to multiple or distant locations to find the resources they need. The Bunker Hill CC student success lead said, "Our student parents stated that they obviously don't have a lot of time, and they certainly don't want to spend the little time that they have searching our website, trying to find resources that are geared towards them. They really made a point of saying that they would like a singular space, one repository, where every resource

that pertains to them resided, and they had quick access to that." The City Colleges of New York (CUNY) student success lead noted that "The other consistent message was that student parents don't know what the supports and services are on campus until they need them, and then it's too late."

Amarillo College's Advocacy and Resource Centers (ARCs) are centralized resource centers that support student parents; the college also has a 2-1-1 website that includes a comprehensive internal and external resource guide for services that support student parents. When most students were still online only, El Paso CC created a Virtual Student Parent Resource Center to jumpstart their outreach. Montgomery College has a [webpage](#) that links student parents to existing information and resources. The college also plans to post QR codes around campus so that student parents can look up services and facilities on their cell phones.

KEY STRATEGY

Show student parents in marketing materials and on social media.

Student parents should be able to see themselves in materials so they feel welcome and a sense of belonging. Such exposure can offer an accurate representation of the number of student parents and capture positive stories about their experiences and successes (Ascend at the Aspen Institute, 2020c). Often, existing materials focus on traditional-aged students without children. According to the SCF student success lead, “Marketing and communication is probably where we’re going to see the most growth. ... We are trying to be intentional about the language that we use, making sure that we use inclusive language that lets people know that we want them to be here.”

Similarly, the Montgomery College student success lead shared, “We want to reassure students through our imagery that they’re welcome, that their children are welcome.” College staff have reached out to student parents to see if they would like to be featured on social media or in other marketing materials, offering a gift basket for the family as incentive. At Amarillo College graduation ceremonies, rather than offering only headshots, the college took pictures of students with their children.

Through these strategies, institutions can reduce the “social stigma” of being a student parent (Ascend at the Aspen Institute, 2020c.) Many student success leads shared that faculty, staff, and others on campus need to see their students as parents, not just as students.

Montgomery College Campus



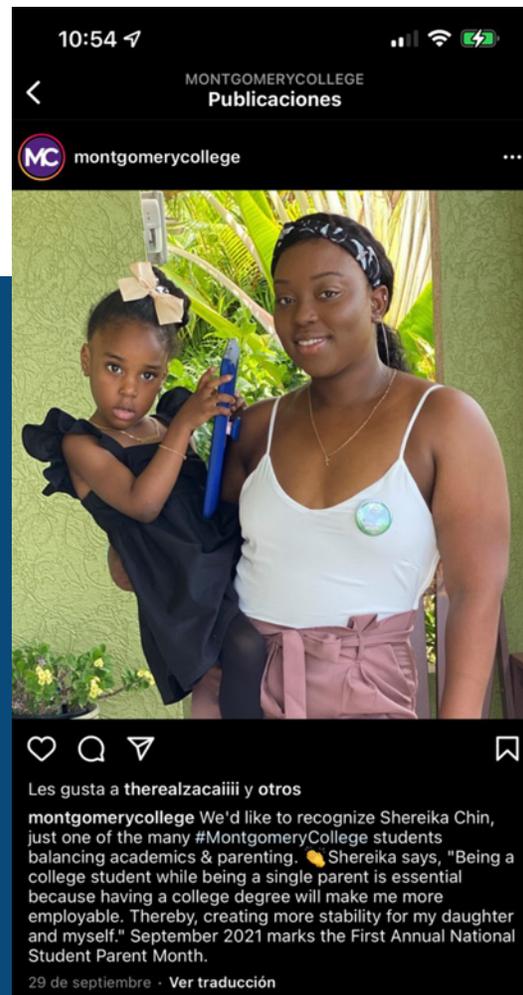
KEY STRATEGY

Ask student parents for feedback on communications.

Focus groups or other gatherings can be used to solicit feedback on existing materials and suggest new ones. Such convenings can also be used to photograph parents with their children. Interviewees stressed the importance of providing things like child care and food at such activities. Student parents can also be involved in crafting stories for social media. For example, Montgomery College

is considering setting up a special social media account for student parents, similar to what they do for their student life team and the writing and language center. Staff could then tap someone in the student parent alliance to manage the account to help ensure that information gets to student parents. Social media could feature student parent stories and direct students to the college website for student parent resources.

Figure 3. Examples of Montgomery College's Student Parent Instagram Posts





PROMISING PRACTICE 4

IDENTIFY OR CREATE FAMILY-FRIENDLY SPACES ON CAMPUS WHERE STUDENT PARENTS CAN BE BOTH STUDENTS AND PARENTS.

In surveys and focus groups, student parents cited a need for specific areas on campus where they can study, meet up with other parents, participate in formal programming such as parent clubs and family-friendly activities, or bring their children when needed. Providing such a space can reduce isolation among student parents (Karp et al., 2020). Although physical space is often limited on campuses — and policies regarding minors on campus often need to be changed — there may be ways to meet this need by being flexible and creative.

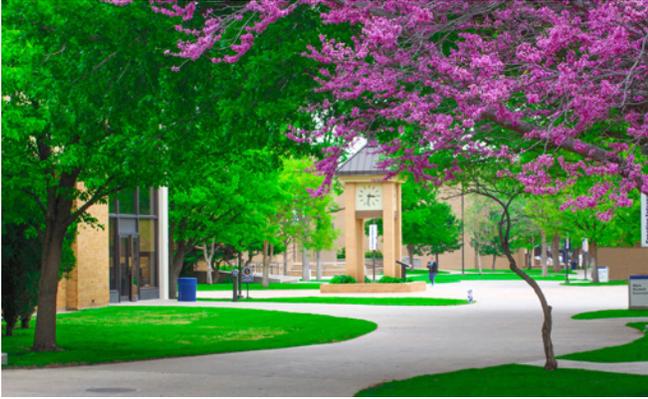
KEY STRATEGY

Provide physical locations on campus where parents can bring their children.

Student parents could use indoor or outdoor areas where they can study while their children participate in activities nearby. For example, El Paso CC is currently building family resource centers, and staff plan to reserve space in those centers so that “students can come in with their children and do homework together. We would have tutors available to have tutoring for the parent and then tutoring for their child and also have fun things for them to learn together,” said the student success lead. Similarly, Montgomery College wants to include space in their family resource centers so that “student parents can come and bring their children with them [and] where they can study” and tutors or other support staff could join them, the student success lead shared. Other institutions are using their tutoring centers in a similar fashion.

Montgomery College also strives to host at least one family event each semester, where parents can bring their children to campus — and not just for holidays or other special events. College staff would like to be strategic and intentional about welcoming children to campus and marketing activities and events to student parents. “Creating a new opportunity looks like working with our universal design team who’s traditionally focused on those with mobility, disability type issues, but looking at meeting student-parent needs through that universal design lens of what is beneficial for student parents is also going to serve the larger community,” the student success lead shared. Similarly, El Paso CC hosts a series called [Tejano Virtual Events](#), which are family-friendly about topics such as how to start a garden and cooking together.

Some institutions are creating outdoor spaces that work as study areas. For example, Colorado Mountain College is creating outdoor family-friendly spaces using durable, natural materials that are easily maintained.



Amarillo College's Campus Clocktower in the Spring

The design concept includes rocks, boulders, wood, native plants, and interesting seating areas that also invite play. The outdoor family-friendly study areas would flow into the preschool outdoor space, which would also have an abundance of natural materials.

KEY STRATEGY

Reserve spaces for affinity groups or other student parent needs.

Colleges can help student parents develop relationships with each other by designating certain areas on campus for them to gather socially. These areas could be located in the student center, a family resource center, tutoring centers, or other facilities. According to the Amarillo College student success lead, “Our student parents told us that they wanted to meet other parents and to hang out with them.” The college created the Students Who Are Parents (SWAP) group and subsequently a SWAP group on the health science campus for nursing and allied health students. El Paso CC wants the new family resource centers to be a place for developing relationships: “We want to create those opportunities for them, for student parents to get to know each other and to form networks,” said the student success lead.

KEY STRATEGY

Enable student parents to use spaces during days, nights, and weekends.

Several student success leads mentioned that student parents generally have time constraints, so offering flexible scheduling of family-friendly spaces and activities can be helpful. For example, some student parents might want to use spaces to study or meet up with other student parents during nights and weekends. Other student parents might preserve nights and weekends for family time, so daytime and/or virtual options would be important. Student parents may also want to access campus-based supports and services at nontraditional times. According to the State College of Florida student success lead, “Our student parents need to be heard, and they need to have options and flexibility.”

In addition, an interviewee from Amarillo explained that the college has discovered that student parents' lives are already so full that finding time to go to a student organization meeting can be a challenge. While the organization still hosts in-person meetings, it is also creating asynchronous meetings. “[Our student parents are] using the technology that we have on the backend with our learning management system so that they can create an asynchronous meeting where you can go and meet” other student parents, said the student success lead. It is similar to a message board with controlled access so that student parents feel comfortable posting.



PROMISING PRACTICE 5

PROVIDE NEW, EXPANDED, OR TARGETED SUPPORTS, SERVICES, AND FACILITIES FOR STUDENT PARENTS ON AND OFF CAMPUS TO INCREASE THEIR ACADEMIC SUCCESS.

Supports and services for student parents vary considerably across institutions. Some institutions have extensive networks of services that have been around for decades, while others are identifying new needs that require targeted interventions. At the same time, some supports or services require more regulation, oversight, funding, or resources than others. Moreover, the supports they are able and need to provide will look different given each institution's unique context. As is the case for other strategies, data collection is key to understanding what services student parents need and making them aware of existing services.

KEY STRATEGY

Alleviate the challenges of child care for student parents.

All of the institutions interviewed said that child care is one of the top concerns for student parents. As the Amarillo College student success lead shared, "We discovered that we needed more affordable child care." College should offer on-campus child care options that are affordable, available, and of high quality; refer student parents to other high-quality options off campus (Karp et al., 2020); or connect student parents to free community-based expertise, such as resource and referral agencies (Ascend at the Aspen Institute, 2020b). Yet many student parents don't have access to quality care on or off campus.

Creating on-campus child care centers can be quite complex due to cost, space, government regulations, and other policies, and some institutions are exploring alternative solutions.

Some of the institutions interviewed, like City Colleges of New York (CUNY), have child care facilities on multiple campuses and are expanding to other off-campus sites where possible. In some cases, sharing agreements allow students to use the child care center closest to them if the campus does not have one. Each program tailors its services to the needs of student parents; for example, some sites are open for extended hours in the evening and over the weekends.⁶ Even during the pandemic, CUNY child care centers were open and providing a range of services to families.

⁶cuny.edu/academics/current-initiatives/office-of-early-childhood-initiatives/childhood/

Amarillo College also has child care centers on some of its campuses and encourages parents to be involved in the activities.⁷ According to the success lead, the centers are currently not self-sustaining, so the college is exploring other options to expand to meet existing demand. Institutions that do not have on-campus child care, or not enough slots to meet the need, could offer links to resources for off-campus child care. Colorado Mountain College, for example, is considering whether it makes sense to establish a referral system with resources to available providers.

Several participating institutions have applied for federal [Child Care Access Means Parents in School Program \(CCAMPIS\)](#) grants to provide quality child care and other supports. In addition to covering vouchers for local child care centers, CCAMPIS funding can pay for a variety of other support services, such as a coordinator, and many institutions use internal funding to provide additional support. For example, Bunker Hill CC is currently working on its application for a CCAMPIS grant to hire a full-time staff member to be a liaison for student parents. The liaison would connect student parents to all the resources on campus as well as navigate off-campus resources. The role would connect with different offices on campus to help market information about resources for student parents, create a website for student parents, and otherwise be a contact for student

parents. This will be a big change, because although students were getting supplemental vouchers for child care, CCAMPIS would cover their entire child care needs. The SCF also applied for a CCAMPIS grant and has asked other institutions in the region that have grants for implementation advice. Amarillo College also applied for a CCAMPIS grant to provide more aid and support to students who need child care assistance.

In short, institutions must be flexible in how they address child care needs, whether using on-campus child care centers, CCAMPIS voucher systems, or structured assistance that links student parents to off-campus providers.



*2020-2021 Ascend PSP Parent Advisor
Waukecha Wilkerson and her family*

⁷ actx.edu/education/childcare

KEY STRATEGY

Strengthen, and improve awareness of, services and facilities that the student parent population needs.

Facilities such as family resource centers, lactation centers, and diaper-changing stations are important for student parents. In fact, Karp et al., 2020 suggest requiring that “all new building or bathroom renovation projects include high-quality diaper-changing stations and lactation spaces.” Montgomery College hopes to have two full-time staff for its resource center and is planning to convert many bathrooms or other facilities to family restrooms with additional changing stations and create online maps and improved signage. El Paso CC is currently identifying places on all campuses for lactation centers as it builds or renovates sites for student parent resource centers.



WE WANT IT TO BE A PLACE WHERE STUDENT PARENTS CAN COME AND BRING THEIR CHILDREN WITH THEM...

It’s really meant to be an all-encompassing safe space for student parents and their children.” - Montgomery College

“We’ve been doing research about how other institutions have done it. Really, the message is, you can start super simple,” the student success lead said. Once the resource centers are open at every campus, the college will develop a directory of services and assemble an advisory group of student parents.

While student parents may need services targeted specifically to them, they may also benefit from services available to the broader student population, such as a food pantry and mental health resources. Accordingly, these services must also work for student parents, at the times and locations most accessible to them. Several institutions have a one-stop system that brings institutional services together with community partners along with an orientation or training for student parents on navigating the services and supports available (Ascend at the Aspen Institute, 2020b).

For example, Bunker Hill CC has a single-stop office that connects student parents to various services and resources, including SNAP benefits, a local food pantry, financial literacy workshops, mental health services, and immigration lawyers. According to an assistant dean of students, “We try to really boost and offer items within our food pantry but also through single-stop and our other services to make sure that a student doesn’t have to make a choice of going without and that they have what they need to be successful.” El Paso CC would like to open social service centers on each campus run by social workers: “The person that is leading that effort is also part of our family-friendly effort. We’ve talked about how we can connect those two because family-friendly centers, social services centers, and mental health services all fit together,” said the student success lead.

SHINING A LIGHT ON THE 2GEN APPROACH

A [two-generation \(2Gen\) approach](#) builds family well-being by intentionally and simultaneously supporting children and parents together. By focusing on the needs and strengths of the child and the parent(s) together to define pathways and integrate services, results lead to pragmatic and positive outcomes for the entire family. Understanding that the needs of children and parents are intertwined, 2Gen approaches strive to propel the whole family forward. Over the past decade, Ascend has led the implementation and expansion of 2Gen approaches by building a national Network of Partners and Ascend Fellows and publishing two influential reports laying the groundwork and then setting a vision to keep the momentum going.⁸ The approach takes into account several components essential to improving family well-being, including social capital, health, economic assets, early childhood education, K-12 education, as well as postsecondary and employment success for parents. Recent years have seen broader awareness and adoption of 2Gen approaches, with 12 states using the approach to align their agencies and programmatic supports and many other efforts at the city and county levels (Mosle & Sims, 2021).

2Gen approaches can take many forms, with some focused primarily on the child with parent elements, and others centered around the parent with child elements. In all, the goal is to move toward integration of services and supports for the family as a whole.⁹

2Gen programming in the postsecondary education space is an area for further exploration. As postsecondary institutions experiment with ways to support parents while simultaneously supporting their children, they are well positioned to contribute to 2Gen efforts.

Figure 4

2GEN APPROACH CONTINUUM

PARENT VOICE AND A FOCUS ON CULTURAL COMPETENCY IS A PREREQUISITE FOR 2GEN



⁸Two Generations, One Future," ascend-resources.aspeninstitute.org/resources/two-generations-one-future/, and "State of the Field: Two Generation Approaches to Family Well-Being," ascend-resources.aspeninstitute.org/resources/state-of-the-field-two-generation-approaches-to-family-well-being/.

⁹See more at <https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/2gen-approach/>.

As part of the Leadership Circle, Ascend asked institutions to consider the importance of the 2Gen approach as they work to efficiently and effectively support student parents. Some of the most promising work centers on supporting the child while the parent is in the classroom learning. Several of the participating institutions discussed efforts that move toward 2Gen approaches. In this spirit, participating institutions have begun exploring ways to develop formal and informal ways to develop programming for both student parents and their children. For example, prior to the pandemic, Colorado Mountain College (CMC) had launched Family Fridays, where student parents come in for pre-college work such as GED and ESL instruction, while their children work on STEM projects. CMC's student success lead appreciated that the 2Gen approach recognizes the multi-generational impact of parent degree attainment, and it "aligns really nicely with Colorado Mountain College's mission to elevate the economic and educational and social well-being of our communities. ... [T]hat would be really powerful and important to have as part of the larger college strategic plan."

El Paso CC's Children's College (a part of continuing education) offers weekend and evening courses where parents can enroll their children while they are studying or in class. These short sessions include both academic topics and fun activities, such as discovering STEM careers, karate, and cooking. College staff have also been considering programming within the student resource centers. They would like faculty to be a part of that effort given their expertise in many topics. As one interviewee explained, "We want them to be speakers. We want them to, hopefully, mentor ... and present on family-friendly topics."

One day, Montgomery College's success lead hopes to be able to say, "If you have to come to class or come to campus to take your course, ... please know that you can bring your child with you if that needs to be the case. When you do that, we are going to have enriching opportunities for your children. We are here to support, not just you, but your child while you're on the campus and a part of our community." College staff believe they are moving toward meeting that goal. They would also like to collect more data in order to expand their 2Gen approach and understand more about the needs of the children, such as their ages and if they have special needs, to inform the type of supports to put in place.



IF YOU HAVE TO COME TO CLASS OR COME TO CAMPUS TO TAKE YOUR COURSE, ... PLEASE KNOW THAT YOU CAN BRING YOUR CHILD WITH YOU IF THAT NEEDS TO BE THE CASE.

When you do that, we are going to have enriching opportunities for your children. We are here to support, not just you, but your child while you're on the campus and a part of our community."
- Montgomery College

ROADMAP FOR SUSTAINABILITY: BUILD A SYSTEMIC SCAFFOLDING

Interviews for this playbook suggest that the five strategies above cannot be sustained without being situated in a systemic scaffolding. While “quick wins” that use existing resources can be a catalyzing place to start, an eye toward system-wide and long-term impacts is essential. Collectively, the following elements comprise the scaffolding:

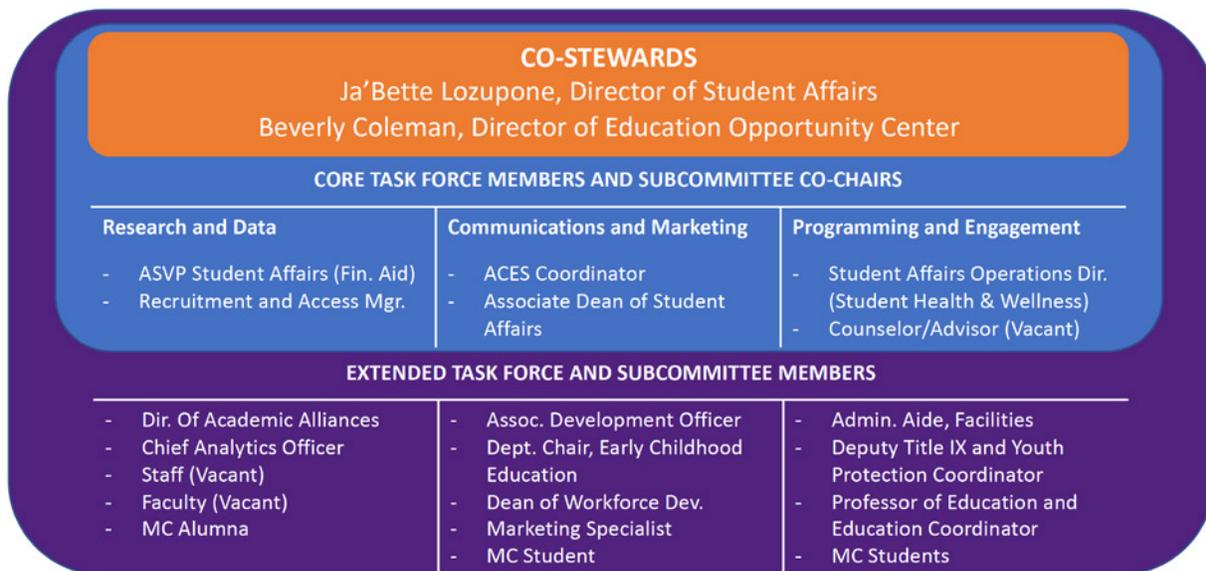
LEADERSHIP

Interviewees stressed the importance of working with top leadership to make supporting student parents an institutional priority. Getting the support of the president and other leaders related to student parent success and instruction is crucial to ensure that supporting student parents “can become part of the DNA of the institution,” as the Montgomery College student success lead put it. Also, the Bunker Hill CC student success lead noted the importance of identifying where the work will eventually “live” and having those leaders be part of the development process.

CENTRALIZED RESPONSIBILITY

Another key factor is the creation of a group, like a committee or task force, that includes diverse offices (e.g., student services, facilities, IR, etc.) as well as faculty and student voices to secure cross-campus commitment. A broad-based campus-wide task force for student parents can help the institution assess and plan related efforts. In addition, a cross-functional task force or leadership group can make student parents a designated population, which helps facilitate targeted programming (Karp et al., 2020).

Figure 5. Montgomery College’s Student Parent Task Force Governance Structure



To accomplish this, Bunker Hill CC leveraged diverse existing groups and their student success lead felt that “pretty much everyone in enrollment services and especially in the student affairs area would be key partners in supporting this work.” Colorado Mountain College interviewees mentioned campus leadership, IR, and the student affairs leaders of the various campuses as important players but noted that “having a point person [for whom] this is part of their job description” is essential. Montgomery College’s ASCEND Parent Initiative Taskforce is led by student affairs and has sub-committees that meet regularly for marketing/communications, programing and engagement, and research and data. Staff in the communications, workforce development, continuing education, student health and wellness, counseling and advising, and Title IX offices, along with faculty in the early childhood program, play important roles. The City Colleges of New York (CUNY) success lead noted that it already has a number of student-parent initiatives in addition to its Student-Parent Task Force. “When you have a number of initiatives working together, you know it helps to build some momentum.”

At the same time, several participating institutions mentioned the opportunities and challenges of implementing their student parent initiatives across multiple campuses. For example, Colorado Mountain College had to determine which services should be at each campus. During this process, staff on the student parent task force reached out to students on their campuses “with varying levels of success,” partly due to COVID-19 and the difficulty of connecting with people virtually. Nonetheless, the college derived insights from the different ways in which campuses were addressing the issue.

FAMILY-FRIENDLY POLICIES

Institutional representatives noted the importance of reviewing and revising institutional policies related to student parents as needed, including policies on minors on campus, to remove barriers to student parent success. For example, at many institutions, parents were not allowed to bring their children into campus buildings due to specific policies, which needed to change to implement portions of their action plans. For Montgomery College, changing policies about having kids on campus was part of a cultural shift for the college. “I am really pleased with the progress that we’ve made,” said the college’s success lead. “It’s a paradigm shift for the institution. When you have policies in place that individuals take as ‘No kids on campus,’ as opposed to, ‘How do we have kids on campus safely?’ you’re talking about really tough changing of hearts and minds.”

At El Paso CC, a group of faculty are leading the effort and are looking at statements from different colleges to better understand the administrative hurdles as well as the opportunities for changing children-on-campus and other family-friendly policies. Once the group decides what might work, it will present a statement to the faculty senate. If the faculty senate supports the idea, the new policy will be included in all syllabi. And at Amarillo College, every syllabus has a statement about the Advocacy and Resource Center (ARC) and its resources. Staff at the SCF needed to work with faculty leaders to create policies about attendance for student parents and children in the classroom. Faculty-disseminated content may have to go through a faculty senate or an institutional policy change review.

FACULTY

Faculty need to be seen as a critical element of outreach since they work directly with students. Engage faculty in student parent efforts to create inclusive and supportive classrooms. Institutions need to not only make faculty and staff aware of relevant institutional policies but also the strengths of and challenges faced by student parents (Karp et al., 2020). These efforts can include public forums with student parents, specific training, or information about how to refer student parents to resources and services. The institutions interviewed mention several ways that faculty have helped with their initiative. “We had this idea of creating professional development sessions for faculty and other administrators so that they too had a better understanding of who our student parents are, what their experiences are, and what their profile is as well,” the Bunker Hill CC student success lead shared.

Colorado Mountain College believes that faculty changes contribute to overall culture change. “There’s a whole other realm of integrating faculty into this conversation,” said the institution’s success lead. “We really haven’t even gone there yet, but little things are happening. I was speaking with one of my faculty members and ... [as] part of her class ... everybody invites their husband and their kids and their dog over.” At the SCF, faculty have been part of the process and are treated like teammates. The student services office educated the faculty about identifying students in need and created a “student of concern” form to connect students with the support staff.



Student parent Lorena Barton and her family

IDENTIFICATION OF EARLY DATA

During the early implementation phase, it is also important to collect data, such as how many student parents are on campus and what their needs are, to present to internal and external audiences to generate buy in and point to what needs to be done. Institutions then need to use data to demonstrate results to garner wider institutional investment. As the student success lead from the SCF noted, “I think to sustain and to keep the momentum going, people have to see results. People have to see that you talked about this program, and you talked about all of these things, but where’s the evidence that it’s happening?” The Colorado Mountain College student success lead suggested institutions “just start somewhere and try something, and then pay attention. And if it works, build on that, and if it doesn’t, try something else. But start somewhere. Don’t be paralyzed by it having to be perfect right from the get-go.”

EXISTING RESOURCES

In thinking about the evolution of their work, many institutions recommended starting with existing resources, such as staff time and internal changes, to quickly begin increasing student parent supports. For example, according to the Colorado Mountain College student success lead, “A lot of the stuff that we’ve done has really not cost very much. It has [cost] in people’s time, like our marketing personnel coming out and taking photos and spending the time to connect with those student parents or the time for our IR professionals to do their data gathering.” Similarly, the SCF student success lead said, “I don’t think you need funding right away. I think the funding is in the time of personnel. You need the ability to bring together a diverse shared-governance group to help.” Examples of using existing resources to kick-start efforts include adding a student parent self-identification question to annual surveys, building family-friendly components into existing institutional events, identifying areas on campus that can be easily converted into family-friendly spaces, and providing professional development to staff and faculty related to student parent best practices.

NEW RESOURCES

After using existing resources and collecting data on initial successes, try to find new funding, partnerships, and resources, and make the case to campus leadership for additional internal resources or staff to sustain efforts. For example, Amarillo College obtained a federal Department of Education grant that will, in part, support student parents on campus by providing parental and financial training. According to the City Colleges of New York (CUNY) student success lead, the “Robin Hood [Foundation] has been very supportive of

both ... the transition coordinator and the campus child care’s infant-toddler expansion.” The SCF student success lead explained that, “With a tiered-step approach, when a grant has come in, we now have a staff member [who] is really going to spearhead and help drive not only the grant, but other components that are going to help to support and drive those finances forward.”

EXTERNAL PARTNERSHIPS

While most participating institutions had relationships with local nonprofit organizations to support or expand services for student parents, several had more extensive relationships that helped level-up their work for and with student parents. In the absence of increased funding at the state or local level, external partnerships can help streamline efforts and create partners in the work. For example, the El Paso success lead explained how they counted on the existing infrastructure and relationships of the TRIO program to recruit student parents for focus groups and to be the “starting point” for student parents by housing the college’s resource directory on their website. Montgomery College is part of the FamilyU cohort within Generation Hope, which “reconnects” top college leadership to the work of supporting student parents by providing scholarships and technical support and obligating decision makers from diverse departments to be a part of the work. As the MC success lead explained, “something that we’re being held accountable for with the FamilyU Cohort [is to do] this assessment.” Generation Hope also builds social capital for student parents by pairing students with mentors, providing case management-style assistance, and creating a sense of community among student parents that leads to peer support.

Institutions can also look to community foundations as potential partners with independent sources of funding. The Community Foundation of Sarasota provides funding for student parents at the SCF who fit a particular profile (e.g., single mothers), which frees up college budgets to support students who don't qualify for the foundation funds. "We have our CCAMPIS grant funding, we have our Chamber Community Foundation funding," said the SCF success lead. "Then we also have our

internal funds. I think it's the most holistic approach that we can take to see this long into the future versus just a one-time program."

A systemic approach, as outlined above, creates important feedback loops, cross-campus buy-in, and demonstrated success that can build momentum for student parent initiatives.



Student parent Shaquanna Graham and her family

PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES: SERVING STUDENT PARENTS FROM INSTITUTIONAL TO NATIONAL LEVELS

Presidents from two participating colleges — Russell Lowery-Hart, PhD, of Amarillo College, and Pam Eddinger, PhD, of Bunker Hill Community College — shared their leadership perspectives on developing promising practices to support student parents. Both highlighted the importance of bringing the parental identity of their students from the background to the foreground of how they understand and interact with their students — or, as they both put it, bringing student parents into their institutional “vernaculars.” Russell explained how Amarillo’s work with Ascend helped the college see how being a parent



*Russell Lowery-Hart, PhD
President, Amarillo College*



*Pam Eddinger, PhD
President, Bunker Hill
Community College*

“drives the decision-making” of their typical student, and “in some cases where we couldn’t accommodate [the typical student], it was driving her decision to leave.” Pam similarly underscored the importance of “bringing a focused lens” to student parenthood as a means of highlighting “a human dimension [of their typical student] to help fight the stereotype of what it means to have children while in college.”

Both leaders emphasized the importance of data in bringing their institutions to this deeper understanding of their student parents. Pam shared how Bunker Hill’s use of a new customer relationship management (CRM) system has allowed the college to collect and track core aspects of students’ experience, notably as parents in this context. Russell noted the impact of creating a student parent data dashboard to help better tailor their supports to students’ needs — and for continual learning about students’ lives.

Beyond their campuses, Pam also emphasized the importance of gathering data to help inform policy at state and national levels to better serve student parents on a broader scale. She sees colleges as the mediators and facilitators “between the reality in the field and what policy needs to happen at state and national levels.” Russell echoed the importance of coordinated efforts that go beyond each institution. He shared that prior to working with Ascend, “we were doing this work in isolation. There wasn’t a collaborative around it. For example, we hadn’t yet figured out how to collect a lot of data around the student parents specifically. ... We really feel like Ascend grounded our work, it legitimized it, it extended it, it connected it to a network broader than ourselves.” In this regard, both leaders are eager to see their successes amplified at their peer colleges across the country.



**I THINK AT THIS POINT IN TIME, THE
COMMUNITY COLLEGES ARE READY, AND
MOST OF THEM ARE ALREADY THERE.**

**What Ascend would be doing is to crystallize
and formalize concepts and vocabularies,
making it coherent.” - Bunker Hill President**

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

This playbook has highlighted several strategies Leadership Circle institutions are using as they implement their action plans. Combined with the recommendations found in the Family Friendly Campus Toolkit, these examples illustrate how institutions can significantly increase support for student parents. Institutions can learn from their peers but tailor the recommended promising practices and strategies to their own institutional contexts.

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Note that each promising practice can stand on its own or be used in combination with other strategies, depending on institutional contexts and needs. In this regard, it can be helpful to step back and take a holistic look at the tools and strategies at hand when determining where your institution can begin. As shared above, however, collecting and analyzing data is the first step in determining who student parents are and what they need at your institution. Thus, making sure that data is a part of the vision is critical to the success of student parent initiatives.

Successful implementation and sustainability of any student parent initiative rely on a systemic scaffolding that includes several underlying elements. These elements include the involvement of institutional leadership; centralized responsibility but diverse stakeholders; family-friendly policies; participation of faculty; identifying short-term results; and using existing and new resources, including external partnerships.

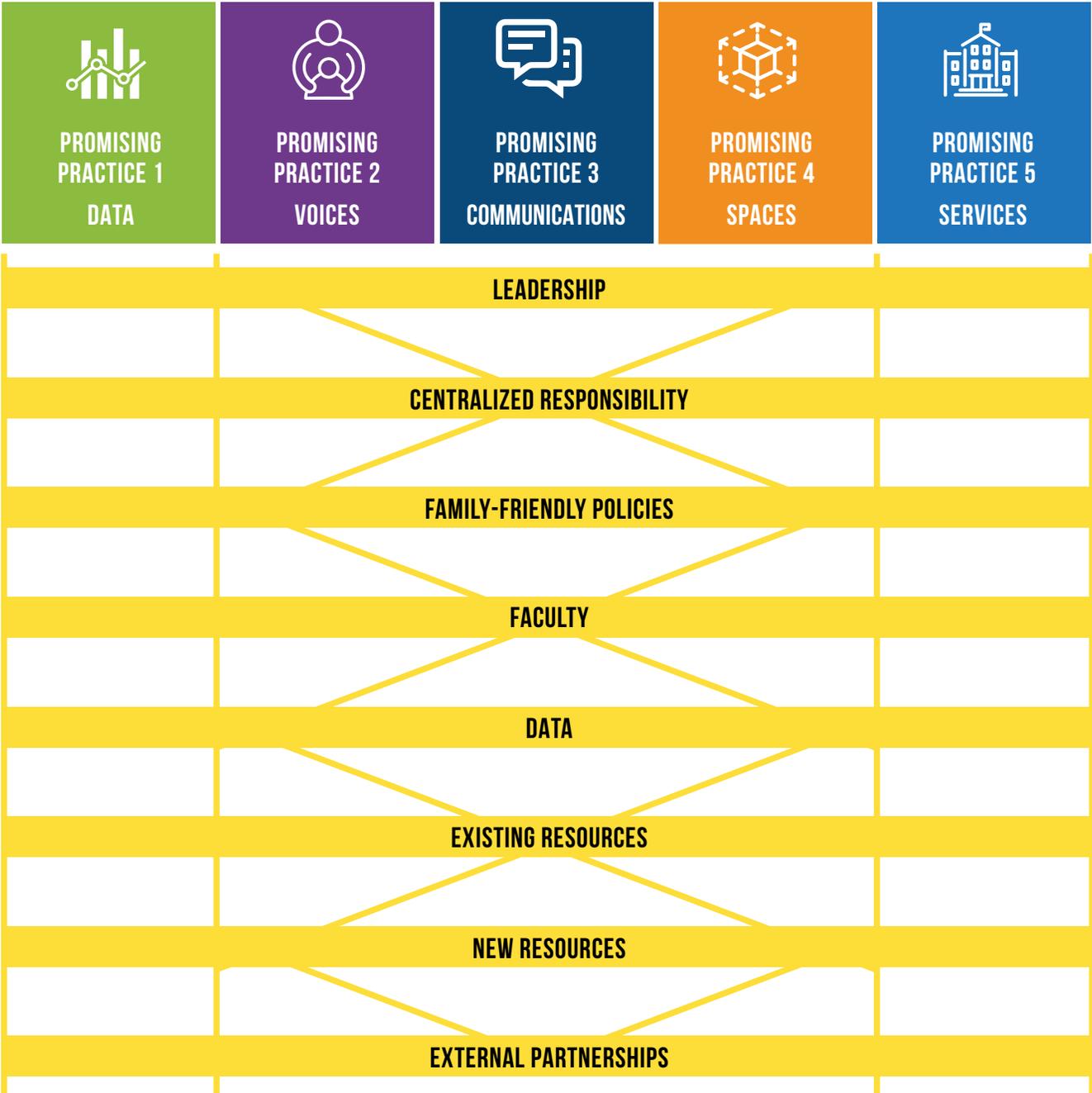


*2020-2021 Ascend PSP Parent Advisor
Lesley Del Rio and her family*

Figure 6 illustrates how the five strategies and the systemic scaffolding fit together. Specifically, the various elements that provide a foundation for sustainability function as the scaffolding on which the strategies ultimately hang.

Note that identifying, collecting, and using data is both a key promising practice for designing supports for student parents and an essential component of the scaffolding that sustains the initiative.

Figure 6. Building Supports for Student Parents



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APPENDICES

INSTITUTIONAL PROFILES



Amarillo College

COLLECTING AND RESPONDING TO DATA

Location: Amarillo, Texas

Sector: Public 2-year

Size: 9,079 UG

Campuses: 6

Realizing it needed data specific to student parents, Amarillo College (AC) built an extensive analytics dashboard to recognize trends among this student population and compare this group to its overall student population. For example, for fall 2020, it learned that of the AC students who completed the FAFSA, 24 percent were parents. Of those student parents, 63 percent are part-time, 42 percent are transfer-focused, and 88 percent receive a Pell Grant. This information can be used to better serve student parents.

AC found that student parents most often suggest that family-friendly places on campus — places where their children were welcome — would be potentially helpful. As a result, AC has been intentional about creating spaces in areas such as its five Academic Success Centers, which include tutoring services. It was especially important to make the success centers accessible to parents since time spent there is the number one predictor of student success at the college.

In addition, AC uses its Advocacy and Resource Center (ARC) to host orientation sessions for student parents to learn about the resources at ARC and in the community. AC uses multiple delivery methods to inform students of available resources,

including a student parent resource page on AC's website, links and notices in Blackboard, and content in course syllabi.

AC sponsors family-friendly activities and events on nights or weekends to encourage parents to meet other parents. As the AC student success lead noted, hosting family-friendly spaces and student parent groups and publicizing them on campus “don't really cost too much money. ... Just identify it, put it in place, and then let students know it's out there.”



**Bunker Hill
Community College**

imagine the possibilities

HEARING STUDENT VOICES

Location: Boston, Massachusetts

Sector: Public 2-year

Size: 9,924 UG

Campuses: 4

Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC) recently identified more than 1,100 student parents (about 12 percent) who completed the FAFSA application, although the true number is likely higher.

BHCC has leveraged the voice of student parents to drive its student parent efforts, notably launching surveys and focus groups to engage and hear from this student population. Respondent participation has been high, and many student parents emailed college staff to express their appreciation for the chance to be heard. A BHCC interim assistant director of institutional research noted that focus

groups allowed the college “to get more nuanced ideas and concepts” regarding the needs of student parents.

Two of the biggest priorities to emerge from this engagement were the importance of child care and a family-friendly campus. After hearing a desire for spaces on campus for affinity groups, BHCC formalized a process for designating spaces for affinity groups, which could include spaces for student parents and their children. One space already planned is a group room at the counseling center.

Realizing the benefit of direct communication with this student population, BHCC is using a new customer relationship management system to identify and communicate with all student parents. The college plans to build a centralized web page of services and resources dedicated to student parents. Once these tools are in place, BHCC will market them to student parents, conveying that they would be both welcomed and supported at the college.



**COLORADO
MOUNTAIN COLLEGE**

FEATURING STUDENT PARENTS

Location: Glenwood Springs, Colorado
Sector: Public 4-year, primarily associate's
Size: 5,315 UG
Campuses: 11

In 2017, Colorado Mountain College (CMC) first added parent status on its application and found that almost 6 percent of students identified as parents. Since then, it estimates that the number has steadily increased to over 10 percent. With a goal of creating and demonstrating a more inclusive environment, CMC has begun to diversify the images used in marketing materials to include student parents and their experiences. As one CMC student success lead expressed, “I think on my campus, it’s definitely becoming more a part of our culture.”

CMC also is partnering with the local 4-H and Colorado Outdoors to plan programming with a 2Gen approach, where learning opportunities would be provided to both parents and their children. Eventually, CMC hopes to pair children’s programming with college classes on Fridays so that parents can take courses while their children are also engaged in learning.

CMC is planning parent study groups at family-friendly study rooms and study areas in outdoor spaces. The college is working with a designer and the campus facilities office to make these spaces effective and pleasing for both parents and kids.



CREATING A FAMILY-FRIENDLY TASK FORCE

Location: El Paso, Texas
Sector: Public 2-year
Size: 26,034 UG • **Campuses:** 5

El Paso Community College (EPCC) has found that approximately 50 percent of its students are parents. The college created a Family-Friendly Task Force to improve the recruitment, retention, persistence, and graduation rates of student parents. The task force included a diverse group of faculty, administrators, and student parents. As the EPCC student success lead reflected, “Being part of this task force clarified for us that this student group, that our focus on this group, could really be a game-changer, not just for individuals, for them, of course, but also for us as an institution.” One goal of this committee is to increase awareness of existing support for student parents, such as extended virtual office hours and an expanded campus services schedule for evening and weekend students. EPCC also established the Virtual Student Parent Resource Center.

Additionally, the task force is identifying spaces on campus that student parents need in collaboration with the deans from all five campuses. There will be lactation rooms on each campus, some in new buildings and others in vacated spaces that will be renovated. In addition, EPCC is creating student parent resource centers, starting simply with study areas and adding more services over time.



**MONTGOMERY
COLLEGE**

CENTRALIZING RESOURCES

Location: Rockville, Maryland
Sector: Public 2-year
Size: 20,037 UG
Campuses: 3

Montgomery College (MC) has found that approximately 15 percent of about 43,000 students (including non-credit students) are student parents. MC had long provided robust support and academic services that benefit all students, but the resources were “highly fragmented,” with no one-stop site for student parents to find relevant resources. MC felt it needed to identify student parents, collect information on their needs, amplify student parent voices, and provide a centralized repository of resources and targeted engagement strategies.

MC created a virtual Family Resource Center (specifically for student parents, which lists resources on and off campus that include financial assistance, food access, and children’s programs. The web page also lists ways for student parents to get involved and have their voices heard, such as joining the Student Parent Alliance or the Ascend Parent Initiative Task Force. The next step for MC is to post QR codes around campus so that student parents can easily pull up services on their cell phones, along with maps of resources such as lactation centers, changing stations, and family restrooms.



SMOOTHING THE TRANSITION

Location: New York, New York
Sector: Public 2- and 4-year system
Size: est. 300,000 UG
Campuses: 25

The City University of New York (CUNY) believes that between 15 percent and 20 percent of students are responsible for dependent children. CUNY has a long history of supporting student parents. Pre-pandemic, CUNY hosted 17 campus child care centers serving over 1,600 families, with some centers having designated lounges for all student parents. Though CUNY recently made its website for the campus child care centers more user-friendly, it knows it can do more to support student parents.

To this end, CUNY used its student parent task force to be even more intentional in supporting student parents. The task force is composed of student parents “first and foremost” but also includes faculty, student service staff, and researchers who have looked at student parents from an academic success, mental health, or women’s perspective. Task force members meet every other month and are currently adding more student parents.

A new project is specifically designed to help high school students who are parents graduate and successfully matriculate to CUNY. A transition coordinator was hired to help these students access child care, financial aid, academic support, and other services they might need. The transition coordinator acts as a bridge between high school and college for student parents.



STATE COLLEGE OF FLORIDA PARTNERING TO MEET CHILD CARE NEEDS

Location: Bradenton, Florida
Sector: Public 4-year
Size: 9,242 UG
Campuses: 3

State College of Florida (SCF) estimates that about 13 percent of its population are student parents. The Parent’s Initiative at SCF spearheads the college’s longstanding efforts to meet the needs of student parents. For example, SCF has had a single-parent scholarship supported through fundraising by student parents for over 30 years.

At this time, student parents’ most vocalized need is child care on campus. According to the SCF dean of students, “The fear and the struggle for child care is real, and it is scary, and it’s creating mental health issues and insecurities.” Since SCF doesn’t have the infrastructure to provide this service itself, it is reaching beyond campus. It applied for a federal CCAMPIS grant, which provides funding to support child care services for student parents who are low income. SCF reached out to other regional institutions that had received CCAMPIS grants to learn lessons from their implementation, obstacles such as lack of child care spots, and how to recruit staff and parents looking for care. “We’re trying to create a hub of support, not just for our students, but for the people who are running the actual programs.” With internal funding, SCF will also provide wrap-around services on campus.

In addition, SCF is partnering with the Community Foundation, which has access to funds serving single mothers. Some of these funds can be applied to SCF’s student parents. Through such partnerships, SCF hopes to provide on-campus child care to as many students as possible.

IMPACT OF COVID-19

Many of the institutions interviewed for this playbook were just launching their initiatives when the COVID-19 pandemic started. The institutions continued to move forward with their plans as best they could or pivoted to support student parents in other ways given the challenging circumstances. For example, the survey recommended in the Family Friendly Campus Toolkit was designed to address on-campus needs; as a result, many institutions needed to modify the survey so that it didn't appear disconnected from the current state of higher education.

At the same time, institutions reported that once students were homebound, not only did student parents need their former supports, but they also often needed even more assistance. For example, a Bunker Hill CC assistant dean of students said, "Our student parents not only had to [transition to remote learning] themselves. They also had to do that for many of their children." These transitions were very difficult for student parents because they may have had only one computer in their house or insufficient internet access. College staff reached out to student parents to assess their needs and provided Chromebooks and other resources, but for many students the barriers extended beyond equipment. Student parents often had to balance instructors' desire to have face-to-face participation in the class with their desire for privacy and not "sharing their home lives."



El Paso Community College in Texas

Institutions attempted to deal with pandemic challenges in various ways. As noted by the Colorado Mountain College student success lead, when "everything blew up in the shutdown ... we did start thinking about, 'What can we do in this online environment?'" The staff became inspired by another institution that in a session hosted by Ascend during the early days of the pandemic shared how it was compiling resources for parents while they were at home. Colorado Mountain College staff employed a current student parent to gather local resources specific to each campus to address needs related to social

services, food insecurity, and transportation, to name a few. The resources were then sent to the student affairs leads at each campus for distribution to their student parents.

City University of New York (CUNY) took another approach. As noted by the student success lead, "One of the things that is almost universal is that student parents need money — and not only for emergencies. ... The university was very, very quick to create a student fund where we just sent students money." Using a standardized formula each quarter, CUNY decided to send money to students as needed, most often directly into their accounts.



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