

The Role of Institutional Support in Shaping Student-Mothers' Success in Higher Education

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Margaret W. Sallee, University at Buffalo
Alyssa Stefanese Yates, uAspire

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Student-parents comprise nearly 20% or 3.1 million of all undergraduate students in U.S. higher education, with women accounting for 74% of all student-parents (American Council on Education, 2023). Of that group, 62% of all student-mothers are single parents (Cruse et al., 2019), which exacerbates their likelihood of basic needs insecurity and low degree completion rates (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020). Only 28% of single, student-mothers graduate with either an educational certificate, associate's degree, or bachelor's degree within six years of study compared to approximately 60% of non-parenting women (Gault et al., 2014; Short et al., 2022). Overall, student-mothers are less likely to persist in higher education than their childless counterparts, due to the financial, physical, and temporal demands of supporting their families and their educational pursuits (Beeler, 2016; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Haleman, 2004; Robinson, 2010). Yet, postsecondary degree attainment is the most effective catalyst to reducing single-mothers' likelihood of living in poverty and improving their social and economic mobility (Cruse et al., 2018; Dodson & Deprez, 2019); one study found single mothers' poverty rate decreased by 40% with the attainment of a postsecondary degree (Cruse et al., 2018).

We would like to thank Cara Monaco and Alexandra LaTronica-Herb for their invaluable assistance as research team members on this project.

**This project was generously funded by the
Jewish Foundation for Education of Women**



Despite higher education's significant impact on student-mothers, their children, and society as a whole, most higher education institutions fail to consider student-mothers' unique needs; for example, institutions often schedule classes and offer student support services during traditional business hours, which student-mothers are typically unable to access due to childcare and work responsibilities (Haleman, 2004; Wilsey, 2013; Yakaboski, 2010). Higher education institutions are also predominantly unaffordable and subsequently inaccessible for student-parents who would need to work, on average, 52 hours per week to pay for childcare and tuition in order to attend a public, four-year institution (Williams et al. 2022); yet higher education professionals are often unaware of financial aid implications and funding opportunities available for parenting-students, particularly for single student-mothers. Furthermore, institutional aid and social benefit programs which student-parents would largely benefit from are typically complicated to apply for and involve requirements that exclude student-parents (e.g., credit enrollment requirements, work requirements, and required validation or paperwork).

Although the majority of institutions overlook and underserve student-parents, some institutions and states have recognized the precarity of this student population and offer resources specifically for student-mothers. Such programs improve student-mothers' connection to the institution, provide academic services, and help them navigate social services (CEW, 2016; Cerven et al., 2013). States including Pennsylvania, Kentucky, California, and New York all offer programs that provide explicit support for student-parents attending state institutions. For example, in early 2020, New York piloted the Family Empowerment Community College Pilot Program (FEP), which provided funding to select State University of New York (SUNY) and City University of New York (CUNY) 2-year institutions to offer services to support degree completion for single student-parents. Targeted interventions included childcare support, advising, tutoring, and career counseling, though services and implementation varied by campus. Although the program has since sunsetted, the state has authorized a new program to provide continued financial support and academic advising to student-parents.

RESEARCH SCOPE & METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to understand how student-mothers' experiences are shaped by institutional programs and resources, including specialized support programs for student-parents. Specifically, we compared the experiences of student-mothers enrolled at public 2-year or community colleges that offered targeted supports for student-parents with those of student-mothers attending four-year institutions without such supports. The study was guided by the following research questions:

- **In what ways, if any, do student-parent support programs shape the experiences of student-mothers in higher education?**
- **How do campus programs and resources address and/or overlook the needs of student-mothers?**



We explored how student-mothers' experiences were shaped by the presence or absence of institutional programs and services across six institutions. We intentionally paired or matched three community colleges - that were recipients of state funding to develop student-parent specific services- with three four-year institutions that were geographically close to and common transfer institutions for the respective community colleges. Across the 6 institutions, research team members interviewed **120 participants**, including **82 student-mothers and 36 staff and faculty members** who either worked in areas dedicated to supporting student-mothers or who interacted with student-mothers in their role. Fifty-one student participants attended one of the three, participating 2-year institutions and 31 were enrolled at a participating four-year institution. Student participants held a variety of racial and ethnic identities, which largely reflected the student population and demographic make-up or composition of their respective institutions and surrounding community. Thirty-nine faculty and staff participants were employed at participating two-year institutions and 17 were employed across the participating 4-year institutions. To provide additional context on the types of services available to student-parents and the challenges staff members faced providing them, we also interviewed an additional 12 staff members from across the statewide system who either directed a student-parent support program or served as director of a campus childcare center who we learned often become de facto points of contact and hubs of information for parenting-students. All interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom and recorded for transcription purposes. We utilized a semi-structured interview protocol with interviews lasting between 45 and 60 minutes.

Student-Parent Participant Demographics			
	2-Year Institutions	4-Year Institutions	Total Sample
Race/Ethnicity	Number	Number	Number
Asian	3	1	4
Black/African American	12	4	16
Hispanic/Latina	11	7	18
White	19	16	35
Biracial	4	2	6
Multiracial	2	0	2
Did not disclose	0	1	1
Total Number of Participants	51	31	82
	2-Year Institutions	4-Year Institutions	Total Sample
Partnership Status	Number	Number	Number
Divorced	4	3	7
Engaged	2	3	5
In a relationship	6	1	7
Lives with partner	4	0	4
Married	19	16	35
Separated	1	1	2
Single	15	5	20
Widowed	0	1	1
Did not disclose	0	1	1
Total Number of Participants	51	31	82

To guide this project, we utilized Bartlett and Vavrus's (2017) comparative case study (CCS), which involves 3 axes of comparison. The horizontal axis compares differences across locations; we interviewed students and staff/faculty at 6 institutions: three community colleges - selected for their participation in a state-funded grant program to develop a student-parent support program - and three, nearby public 4-year institutions.

The vertical axis focuses on the impact of policy across various sites; in the larger grant study, we traced the impact of state policy and support on student-mothers. To account for the transversal axis which considers time, we asked staff to highlight how institutional support for student-mothers changed over time.

SYNOPSIS OF KEY FINDINGS

The study produced rich data that captured both the strengths student-mothers and the staff who serve them bring to higher education and the challenges they navigate within their respective institutions. In what follows, we highlight four different, but related, key findings, which are described in depth in forthcoming papers.

1

Organizational Culture Makes a Difference

The culture of an institution shaped institutional actors' (e.g., students, faculty, and staff) beliefs about the responsibility of a campus to support student-parents. Student-parents and staff/faculty at two-year institutions believed student-parents need help to remain enrolled and be academically successful, and discussed that the institution has an obligation to provide such support. In contrast, students and faculty/staff at four-year institutions suggested that the institution was not responsible for providing support to student-parents. Although there were a handful of faculty and staff members who took it upon themselves to provide support or guidance for student-parents on their respective campuses, student-mothers were offered little formal or institutionalized support at four-year institutions. Overall, two-year institutional actors described the institution's role in supporting the whole student - including their parenting identity - compared with four-year institutional actors who described the institution as responsible for supporting all students rather than prioritizing or centering a particular subpopulation or identity, particularly parenting which they implied was an identity or role separate from or outside of higher education. Both students and faculty/staff in the community college and four-year college/university sectors constructed a shared understanding of the culture which shaped how they perceived higher education's role in and responsibility for supporting student-parents.

2

Staff Members Often Work Outside the Bounds of Their Professional Roles Responsibilities to Support Student-Parents

Institutional actors, both individually and collectively, worked to support student-parents, often going against general institutional culture to do so. Although student participants described a need for support to accomplish their educational goals, few colleges and universities provided comprehensive institutionalized support (i.e., well-

resourced programs or positions focused on supporting student-parents) for this student population; even those institutions that received state funding for student-parent support struggled to provide the same quality of support for students once the funding ended. Subsequently, the onus was placed on faculty and staff to fill in the gaps and provide necessary support for parenting students - often outside of employees' formal role and responsibilities. Participants described utilizing small actions, grant money, and indirect forms of influence to create campus-wide initiatives to support parents across the institution, such as creating and maintaining lactation rooms. Other staff voluntarily expanded wraparound services, such as the campus food pantry, to support student-parents in response to their institution's lack of integrated or intentional support services. Faculty and staff also used their knowledge of the campus and surrounding community along with their social networks to develop partnerships to access resources for student-parents, illustrating that staff and faculty often act outside their official job responsibilities to support student-parents when existing campus services fail to meet their needs.

3

Affordable, On-Campus Childcare is Critical --and So Are The Staff

Although many faculty and staff play critical roles in helping facilitate student-parents' success, on-campus childcare center directors and other staff members as well as subsidized childcare were noted by student-mothers as being especially pivotal in allowing them to maintain their enrollment. One campus childcare center director was described as being "responsible for more young women with an associate's degree [in the region] than anyone else." In part, this was because she, like many other center directors, helped direct student-parents to on and off-campus resources, hosted holiday gift drives, maintained a clothing and diaper closet, provided parenting advice, and served as an important homebase for student-mothers. Equally important to the staff members' actions was the availability of free or extremely reduced cost childcare. Many of the student-parents attending the two-year institutions had access to highly subsidized on-campus childcare, paying \$15 a week to send their kids. Many reported that they would not have been able to attend without the financial as well as emotional support.

4

Student-Mothers Bring Incredible Strengths to their Pursuit of Higher Education

Despite the many challenges that student-mothers may encounter, they also bring a multitude of strengths to facilitate their persistence. As such, we developed a model of student-mothers' capitals, inspired by previous models by Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and Tara Yosso (2005). In particular, we identified five capitals that student-mothers bring with them to the pursuit of higher education, which we labeled: **motivational, competency, agentic, relational and navigational capital**. A brief description of each follows:

- **Motivational capital** is what drives student-mothers to pursue higher education. Many position themselves as having different motivations as their childless peers, including serving as role models for their children, providing a path to financial security and/or switching careers, or for self-fulfillment

- **Competency capital** refers to the skills that student-mothers bring with them to higher education, often developed out of the skills gained as mothers, including balancing their multiple roles as mothers, students, and sometimes employees; skills gained through life experience through employment; and skills gained based on their roles as mothers, including heightened emotional empathy.
- **Agentic capital** refers to the drive that many student-mothers adopt in their pursuit of higher education. Motivational capital is why or what drives student-mothers in their educational pursuits while agentic capital is the how. This capital is intricately connected with student-mothers' genders and the responsibilities that emanate from traditional gender roles. By pursuing higher education, participants expressed agency in ways antithetical to traditional motherhood and marriage.
- **Relational capital** refers to the relationships or social networks that participants relied on to help fill in the gaps or mitigate common conflicts between student-mothers' academic and parenting roles and responsibilities. These networks are composed of friends, family members, peers, and campus professionals who help to facilitate student-mothers' academic success and familial survival.
- **Navigational capital** refers to student-mothers' ability to move through higher education and access institutional resources. Many student-mothers were successful in accessing campus-based resources through critical campus agents, which echoes past findings on the importance of institutional agents in supporting all students and student-parents in particular. However, some participants had little help navigating their institutions and tracked down resources on their own - displaying self-reliance and persistence.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Based on our findings, we offer recommendations to different constituencies-- **campus administrators, policymakers, and philanthropies**--about how to continue to support student-parents.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CAMPUS ADMINISTRATORS

1 Designate A Student-Parent Contact on Campus

Our findings illustrate that student-parents do best when they have at least one staff member who can help them navigate their concerns. All colleges should identify one staff member whose responsibilities include helping student-parents navigate both academic and parenting issues, including course registration, financial aid, childcare needs, campus and community referrals, and other concerns. The staff member might be housed in a dean of students office, student-parent support program (when one exists), adult/commuter students functional area, or any other unit. The location does not matter, but the staff member's existence must be adequately and repeatedly publicized throughout each school year. Additionally, the staff member should be provided necessary financial resources as well as be integrated into the campus community (e.g., other staff and faculty are aware of this role and readily refer students to them; staff member is able to collaborate with other campus offices and staff) to ensure student-parents receive holistic support.

2 Create Student-Parent Support Networks

Although student-parents have limited time to engage in on-campus activities, our findings suggest that they do well when they are enmeshed in networks of both other students and staff. Each campus should create a student-parent group to allow student-parents to come together to share concerns and support one another. Although we would encourage in-person meetings (ideally those in which children are welcome or drop-in childcare is provided), an active virtual engagement option--through group texts, Slack channels, or the like--would likely facilitate community and allow student-parents to support one another on day-to-day matters.

3 Change Narrative About Student-Parents

Our student-parent capitals model reminds faculty, staff, and student-mothers themselves that student-mothers come to college from a position of strength rather than deficit. Although institutions can and should provide student-mothers with necessary supports to succeed, one such support might simply be helping student-mothers identify their own strengths--and also remind faculty and staff of all the life demands that student-parents are navigating to pursue higher education.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

1 Fund Student-Parent Support Programs

Given the success of national student-parent support programs, we would suggest that state policymakers create student-parent support programs at higher education institutions across both the 2-year and 4-year sectors. Such programs might carry financial support, such as institutional scholarships, but critically should also carry support with identifying and subsidizing quality childcare. Other incentives might include offering targeted emergency funds for student-parent emergencies, paying for books and other necessary supplies, transportation assistance (e.g. bus/subway passes, gas cards), and offering help with transitioning out of higher education and either into the workforce or graduate school.

2 Remove Barriers to Student Access

Institutional and state policymakers should also remove barriers to students' access to higher education. Although our suggestion above identifies financial barriers, many other barriers stand in student-parents' way. Policymakers might follow California's lead with Assembly Bill (AB) 2881 or Texas' SB 459, both of which require all public institutions to provide priority course registration for student-parents. Student-parents might also benefit from designated parking on campuses in which parking is at a premium.

3 Collect Data on Student-Parents

Many campuses fail to collect data on students' parenting status, which proves to be little help in knowing whether this population is being adequately served. We recommend that all institutions collect information on students' parenting status on their admissions application and also provide ways for students to update their parenting status throughout their enrollment to identify those who have children while students. For example, the institution might include a question on parenting status or dependents in course registration processes or other repetitive administrative processes. Having data about the number of student-parents and who they are allows campuses to identify parenting-students, solicit , how the institution might best serve them, and more easily communicate or share information on available campus support services. In this pursuit, policymakers might support and adopt legislation mandating public institutions to collect and report data on student-parents. Such legislation or policies exist in Michigan, Oregon, Illinois, Texas, and Maryland.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PHILANTHROPIES

1 Fund On (and Off-) Campus Childcare

Access to affordable and reliable childcare stands as the most critical factor in shaping student-parents' enrollment. Philanthropies might partner with institutions and/or state systems of higher education to subsidize childcare for students-parents at either on- or off-campus providers. Philanthropies can also support the development of additional forms of childcare on-campus, such as drop-in childcare, emergency or sick care, or childcare cooperative spaces. Such support need not be limited to public institutions, as many students attend private institutions that provide minimal childcare support.

2 Support Communities of Practice

Organizations might develop communities of practice that allow institutions interested in supporting student-parents to come together to share ideas as they work on creating mechanisms to better support student-parents. Such Communities of Practice should come with dedicated funding, regular in-person and/or virtual convenings, and staff support. Philanthropies may draw inspiration from established Communities of Practice, such as Urban Institute's Data-to-Action Campaign and the Aspen Institute's Parent Powered Solutions Fund. Communities of Practice might consider focusing on student-parents' experiences attending different types of institutions (e.g. Hispanic Serving Institutions, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Small Liberal Arts Colleges) or supporting particular populations of student-parents (single parents, immigrant parents, etc).

3 Support Institutions' Efforts to Develop A Culture of Assessment

One of the greatest barriers we have witnessed in our work is that few institutions collect data on the presence of student-parents, let alone on the impact of programs on their experiences and degree completion. Philanthropies and other groups might provide funding for institutions to develop a culture of assessment to first encourage institutions to accurately count the number of student-parents on their campus and second to determine the effectiveness of institutional support programs for this group.

REFERENCES

- American Council on Education (ACE) (2023). Student-parents in the U.S. higher education system infographic. ACE. <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Student-Parent-Infographic.pdf>.
- Bartlett, L., & Vavrus, F. (2017). *Rethinking case study research: A comparative approach*. Routledge.
- Beeler, S. (2016). Undergraduate single mothers' experiences in postsecondary education. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 2016(176), 69-80.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). Habitus, code et codification in *De quel droit? Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, 64, 40-44.
- Center for the Education of Women (CEW) (2016). Helping students with children graduate: Taking your college services to the next level. University of Michigan. <http://www.cew.umich.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/CEW-Student-Parent-Paper-13-June-FINAL-1.pdf>
- Cerven, C., Park, V., Nations, J., & Nielsen, K. (2013). College can be complicated: Low-income single mothers' experiences in postsecondary education (Report No. 11). Pathways to Postsecondary Success.
- Cruse, L. R., Holtzman, T., Gault, B., Croom, D., & Polk, P. (2019). *Parents in college: By the numbers*. Institute for Women's Policy Research.
- Dodson, L., & Deprez, L. S. (2019). "Keeping us in our place": Low-income moms barred from college success. *Contexts*, 18(1), 36-41. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504219830675>
- Duquaine-Watson, J. M. (2007). "Pretty darned cold": Single mother students and the community college climate in post-welfare reform America. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 40(3), 229-240.

- Gault, B., Reichlin, L., & Román, S. (2014). *College affordability for low-income adults: Improving returns on investment for families and society*. Institute for Women's Policy Research.
- Goldrick-Rab, S., Welton, C. R., & Coca, V. (2020). *Parenting while in college: Basic needs insecurity among students with children*. Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. Temple University.
- Haleman, D. L. (2004). Great expectations: Single mothers in higher education. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 17(6), 769-784.
- Pare, E. R. (2009). *Mother and student: The experience of mothering in college*. Wayne State University.
- Robinson, E. E. (2010). *Mothers, workers and students: Examining experiences of single mothers transferring from community colleges into universities* (doctoral dissertation). North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC.
- Short, C. G., Grant, R. M., Haynes, D., & Lewis, N. L. (2022). *Higher together: The impact of a college degree for young parents*. Generation Hope. <https://www.generationhope.org/alumni-report-2022>.
- Williams, B., Bitar, J., Polk, P., Nguyen, A., Montague, G., Gillispie, C., Waller, A., Tadesse, A., & Elliott, K. C. (2022). *For student parents, the biggest hurdles to a higher education are cost and finding child care*. The Education Trust and Generation Hope. <https://edtrust.org/resource/for-student-parents-the-biggest-hurdles-to-a-higher-education-are-costs-and-finding-child-care/>.
- Williams, B. & Breakstone, M. (2024). *EmpowerED dads: Amplifying voices, advancing higher education for student fathers*. Generation Hope. <https://www.generationhope.org/empowered-dads-student-fathers-report>.
- Wilsey, S. A. (2013). Comparisons of adult and traditional college-age student mothers: Reasons for college enrollment and views of how enrollment affects children. *Journal of College Student Development*, 54(2), 2091-214. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2013.0018>
- Yakaboski, T. (2010). Going at it alone: Single-mother undergraduate's experiences. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 47(4), 463-481.
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69-91.

