



KNOWING OUR STUDENTS

# Parenting Students

Achieving  
the Dream 

 ADVISING  
**SUCCESS**  
NETWORK

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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Introduction . . . . .	2
Supporting Parenting Students . . . . .	4
What Is: A Closer Look at the Student Experience . . . . .	6
Listening to Student Stories . . . . .	6
Gina Castillo . . . . .	6
Krystal Kaether . . . . .	7
Commonly Encountered Barriers. . . . .	8
Structural Barriers. . . . .	8
Policy and Process Barriers . . . . .	9
Cultural/Attitudinal Barriers . . . . .	10
What Works: Strategies To Address Parenting Students’ Challenges . . . . .	11
What Wows: Effective Approaches Implemented in the Field . . . . .	12
Dallas College: Using Data To Design Supports. . . . .	12
Florida State College at Jacksonville: Elevating the Student Voice To Build a Family-Friendly Campus . . . . .	12
United Tribes Technical College: Supporting the Family Unit. . . . .	13
Recommendations and Implementation . . . . .	14
<b>Leverage Data To Understand and Serve Parenting Students.</b> . . . . .	14
<b>Provide Flexible Options in Academic and Advising Support</b> . . . . .	15
<b>Provide Financial Support in a Variety of Forms and Sources</b> . . . . .	16
<b>Connect to Family and Personal Supports</b> . . . . .	17
<b>Align Community Resources</b> . . . . .	18
Conclusion . . . . .	19
Acknowledgements . . . . .	20
References and Resources . . . . .	21



# INTRODUCTION

Achieving the Dream's guide **Knowing Our Students: Understanding and Designing for Success** (2023) provides critical information and strategies to help colleges understand the diverse students they serve and provides tools to organize this important campus work.

The purpose of the supplemental guides is to highlight the significance of population-specific challenges on college campuses. The information in this guide results from several years of examining holistic support models in the field and exploring how well these models serve parenting students. Our information results from countless conversations with advisors, support staff, faculty,

and (of course) students. We are grateful to the students and stakeholders who have taken the time to share their insights and expertise with us.

The supplemental guides are organized into sections that leverage the **student-centered design** process, referenced in the original guide, to help colleges fully understand the challenges and to focus on designing processes that support student populations who have been historically marginalized or have not been prioritized, such as parenting students.

Also integrated into the supplemental guides (and discussed in the original guide) is the **framework for change** concepts — the structures, processes, and attitudes that sometimes create barriers for students. This framework helps colleges design student-centered and equitable structures, policies, and processes to better serve their students. This guide identifies these challenges and barriers emphasized by the voices of parenting students and shares recommendations and examples from the field for this population.

## TALKING ABOUT PARENTING STUDENTS

Community colleges serve a diverse group of students. Over time, we have seen an increase in parenting students. These students are referred to as “students who are parents,” “parenting students,” and “student-parents,” and they often include “pregnant students” as well. While the terminology varies, one term has emerged as the preferred term for these students — “parenting students.”

According to the *Women Change Worlds* blog, “Student Parents or Parenting Students? Why Terminology Matters” by Wellesley Centers for



Women, “terminology shapes how we think about groups of people, and how they think about themselves” (Green, 2022). This term acknowledges the primary identity of these individuals as parents, recognizing their role and commitment to their children while they are students themselves. Their primary role is that of a parent, of which they are incredibly proud; all other duties are secondary. In this guide, we will refer to this population as “parenting students” to recognize and respect this role.

**This guide on parenting students begins with a discussion on who parenting students are, the profound effect that support for this population of learners can have at the individual, family, and community levels, the specific barriers that parenting students face, and general strategies for combatting these challenges.**

profound effect that support for this population of learners can have at the individual, family, and community levels, the specific barriers that parenting students face, and general strategies for combatting these challenges. We profile a parenting student from Clovis, New Mexico, and one from Abilene, Texas. We then present three case studies of community colleges doing dynamic work with parenting students: Dallas College (Dallas, Texas), Florida State College at Jacksonville, and United Tribes Technical College (North Dakota). The guide concludes with specific recommendations for

**ABOUT THIS GUIDE**

This guide on parenting students begins with a discussion on who parenting students are, the

community colleges looking to begin or expand their work serving parenting students.



# SUPPORTING PARENTING STUDENTS

According to [“Data Points: Significantly more parent students attend community college,”](#) a report by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), a considerable proportion of community college students are parents (2021). In 2019, approximately 26% of community college students had dependent children. We learned from the ChildTrends report [“Higher Education Can Support Parenting Students and Their Children with Accessible, Equitable Services”](#) that 70% of all parenting students are women, 62% are single mothers, and most of these students are students of color (Ryberg et al., 2021). They attend community colleges at significantly higher rates, and many are single parents with unmet basic needs. In a recent article by The Education Trust and Generation Hope, [“For Student Parents, the Biggest Hurdles to a Higher Education Are Cost and Finding Child Care,”](#) parenting students’ biggest barriers are financial, including rising college costs, housing, food and child care (Williams et al., 2022).

Education is a key driver of economic mobility, and many colleges and universities serve as a pathway for individuals to enhance their skills and career prospects. The impact in supporting a student to completion affects not only the student but their children as well and, thus, has a two-generation influence. Parenting students who enroll in our colleges bring resiliency and assets that make them excellent students. In a recent article by Ascend at the Aspen Institute, [“Parents in College by the Numbers,”](#) data indicate that parenting students frequently achieve higher GPAs (33%) than their peers without children

(31%), but parenting students tend to have lower program completion rates (2019). In general, they are attending institutions that have not been intentionally designed to serve their unique needs, which puts them at risk for not completing their degrees.

Community colleges play a vital role in providing accessible education, and supporting parenting students helps remove obstacles that might otherwise prevent them from pursuing a college degree. Community colleges aim to equip students with practical skills and knowledge and to provide holistic supports so students can achieve their academic and career goals.

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The collective impact of supporting parenting students extends beyond individual families. It contributes to building stronger, more resilient communities and has broader implications for social and economic development. Supporting parenting students has a collective impact that extends far beyond individual families. When these students succeed, they help build stronger, more resilient communities and drive broader social and economic progress.

As a key demographic in higher education, parenting students are central to advancing social justice and equity. By providing targeted resources and addressing the systemic barriers they face, institutions can play a pivotal role in their success. Supporting parenting students also strengthens diversity initiatives, helping campuses maintain and enhance a vibrant, inclusive student body. Inclusive environments foster a sense of



belonging, which is crucial for the retention and achievement of parenting students. The benefits extend to future generations as well: children of college-educated parents are more likely to pursue higher education themselves, creating a powerful ripple effect. By prioritizing support for parenting students, colleges and universities contribute to lasting, positive change and advance their mission to provide equitable opportunities for all learners to reach their full potential. This aligns with the broader goals of educational institutions to provide opportunities for all individuals to reach their full potential.

For more information on parenting students, please see the following resources:

- **The Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR)** conducts research on women and families, including studies focused on parenting students and their challenges in higher education. The reports and briefs provide valuable insights on parenting students: [iwpr.org](http://iwpr.org).
- **The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice** provides valuable data and research on various aspects of student experiences, including those of parenting students. Various studies and reports highlight the challenges and needs of students from diverse backgrounds, including those who are parents: - The Hope Center - Virtual Policy Summit - Learn About HIP!.
- **The SPARK Collaborative** provides data and research related to parenting students attending college. The initiative focuses on understanding the challenges faced by parenting students and aims to improve their experiences in higher education. The SPARK Collaborative often collaborates with various organizations and institutions to gather and analyze data on the demographics, needs, and success rates of parenting students. For the most accurate and up-to-date information, including specific reports and statistics, you can visit the website or check their publications: SPARK Collaborative | Home. They may offer insights into the experiences of parenting students, as well as recommendations for support and policy changes to enhance their success in college.



# WHAT IS: A CLOSER LOOK AT THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

To fully understand the student experience, it is important to know what students need and what stands in their way. There are several approaches that a college can take to gain a comprehensive perspective on the student journey. Colleges can engage in process mapping, student journey mapping, or opportunity assessments to gain a better understanding of what accelerates momentum and what impedes student progression and success. As part of those processes, colleges should leverage both quantitative data on student identities, experiences, outcomes, and progression and qualitative data — through interviews and focus groups — that focus on the student experience and provide a fuller understanding of their needs (both academic and personal).

Engaging and elevating the student voice is critical to an accurate understanding of the student experience. Sections III and IV of the *Knowing Our Students* Guide provide strategies and tools for colleges to use in pursuit of a richer understanding of their students that will set them up for a successful design process.

## Listening to Student Stories

### Gina Castillo

Gina Castillo (pronouns: she/her/hers) resides in Clovis, New Mexico, where she grew up. As a child, she did not have specific role models, but she was aware of people she did not want to emulate. Addiction and alcoholism were prevalent in her family, and she aspired to something more.

At the age of 17, Gina had a child, prompting her to come to the realization that she wanted to create a very different life for him than what she experienced as a youth. As a result, she enrolled at Clovis Community College, where she began her college journey studying psychology and social work. She has become an advocate for children and teens who have grown up in situations similar to her own: without a trusted person to confide in or turn to. Currently, Gina holds a Bachelor of Science in psychology and social work and plans to pursue a Master of Social Work next spring.

**Engaging and elevating the student voice is critical to an accurate understanding of the student experience.**

As a college student, she encountered many difficulties, including caring for a child. Housing was one of the most challenging aspects of her college experience because she did not have a place of her own. She lived with her mother, which was not always the best environment. Since she could not work outside the home due to her

responsibilities as a mother, she relied heavily on financial aid to cover expenses until she became a student worker (through work-study). Gina had to rely on the child's father for child care since her bills exceeded her income. The stress of these challenges made it difficult for her to make ends meet.

Gina discovered that the most significant challenge during her educational journey was balancing school and parenthood. She often juggled the responsibilities as a working student and parent, which was a constant struggle. She always felt like she was neglecting her child or her studies and found it challenging to find a happy medium.



The work-study program was incredibly beneficial for Gina in several ways. First, it bridged her financial needs; and second, it facilitated her familiarity with the college and its resources, which was crucial for her overall success. Most importantly, Gina built lasting friendships with her colleagues, who have also served as a major source of motivation and inspiration.

Gina says, “A combination of family and professional support was necessary for this success to happen. Although my mother and I were at odds most of the time I lived with her, when I had my own place and did things on my own, I saw things from her point of view, especially as a mother. She continues to support me in any way she can, as well as my friends and colleagues.”

Gina advises other parenting students to never give up. She states, “It is not easy, I know. I understand how exhausting the long days and early mornings are for you, but you should realize that a small person is always observing you, and you are their superhero! You are capable. It will all be worthwhile!”



## Krystal Kaether

Krystal Kaether began her education journey as a 16-year-old dual credit student at Cisco Junior College in Abilene, Texas. Through involvement with Upward Bound, she became interested in the field of psychology, and this shaped her future path through higher education. Krystal graduated from high school as a junior, a year earlier than her peers. At that time, she enrolled at the University of Texas at Arlington (UTA) where her advisor helped her combine her two passions into a dual major of psychology and criminal justice.

As an undergraduate student, Krystal became a mother at the age of 18. At that time, she did not have health care. She was able to access health care through government assistance for pre- and postnatal care. Her finances were tight, so she took on two part-time jobs to help make ends meet — one at the campus library and the other at the local Boys and Girls Club.

Krystal also lacked access to child care. The lack of a dependable child care facility for her son caused her significant worry and stress. She had an empathic professor who allowed her to bring her son to class; however, she felt shame and a lack of belonging when she did. Her professor supported her and found a day care facility in partnership with the college, located less than a mile from campus. When her son was 18 months old, she managed to enroll him in that day care at a significantly discounted rate. This resource, along with the support she received from the faculty member, was a turning point for her educational journey.

Krystal also had support from her academic advisor, who helped her identify internship opportunities that helped her both financially and professionally. The advocacy of her professor and the support from others made her feel valued and that others cared about her success and respected her role as a parent.

In Krystal's words:

*Without a network of support from UTA faculty, I am not sure I would have been as successful*



*in completing college. This is a harsh reality of college mothers. You get caught between wanting to achieve your goals and taking on a new role of motherhood. Society values mothers as the primary caregivers of the family, and the reality is most mothers who do not have the support or network to keep positively reinforcing that they too can make their dreams come true often only see stress, anxiety, failure, and dropping out as the only option. Parenthood is not an obstacle to college degrees. Parenthood is motivation to show your children that the life you want is attainable. With grit, faith, and developing a support network, college is achievable. There is no feeling like walking across the stage after years of hard work, hearing your name called as a graduate, listening to the cheers from the crowd, other cheers coming from ... other families there to see their loved ones do just the same thing, and having that "I've really done it" moment. It is a moment of pride, gratefulness, and humility.*



like Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS), or informal channels where students must often self-report on their parenting status. This hodge-podge collection of data often leaves colleges with an incomplete understanding of who their students are.

## Commonly Encountered Barriers

Colleges can identify barriers by examining structures and processes and by exploring culture and attitudes related to serving and supporting parenting students. Institutions should prioritize redesigning processes that remove barriers that have a disproportionate impact on parenting students and are in their sphere of control.

## Structural Barriers

### TRACKING PARENTING STUDENT DATA

To effectively support parenting students, colleges need to know who they are and what they need. While colleges are making strides in using intake surveys to connect parenting students to holistic supports, very few colleges have effective systems for identifying their parenting students on campus. Colleges rely on data that sometimes comes from their application or that comes out of Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) data, data from small grant-funded programs

### IMPACT DATA

Many colleges have grant-funded programs to support their parenting students specifically and intentionally. Programs like the Federal TRIO Programs (TRIO) and CCAMPIS connect parenting students with supports to help them with unmet basic needs like food and housing insecurity, transportation, and child care. The data that is collected in these types of programs is primarily tracking and utilization data. There is little longitudinal impact data being collected to better understand if these supports get students to successful completion.

### ACADEMIC AND BASIC NEEDS SUPPORTS

Academic and personal supports for students vary on college campuses. Supports that help fulfill unmet basic needs, such as food pantries, access to affordable housing, technology lending programs, affordable transportation, mental health services, legal supports, financial planning assistance, and child care, can be especially



critical for parenting students. Parenting students say that they do not use these supports on campus because many did not realize they were available or were intended for their use.

## **BELONGING THROUGH COMMUNITY BUILDING**

Parenting students are excellent resources and advocates for each other. While almost one in four students on campus are parenting students, many experience isolation and a lack of belonging on campus due to their complex lives. Having a campus job, engaging in student life, or taking a student leadership role can help parenting students connect with each other. Students share that they feel guilty for the time they need to dedicate to being a successful student. They make tough decisions every day about how they will spend their most valuable asset—their time. Very few campuses have dedicated family-friendly spaces where parenting students can feel comfortable bringing their children.



## **Policy and Process Barriers**

It takes an intentional approach to foster a campus culture that values and accommodates the diverse needs of parenting students. Policies and processes that are not family-friendly can lead to a sense of exclusion and hinder the ability to succeed.

### **CHILDREN ON CAMPUS POLICY**

When parenting students see families welcomed on campus through events or family friendly spaces, it contributes to their sense of belonging. Whether a campus is family friendly is often dictated by policies regarding the presence of children on campus. When explicit, these policies are often found to be harsh and punitive instead of welcoming and asset based.

### **ACADEMIC POLICY AND PRACTICE**

The way colleges schedule and conduct classes and offer academic support impacts sense of belonging for parenting students. Parenting students report needing flexibility in creating schedules, in attendance, in assignment deadlines, and in accessing academic support. Exploring the language around course policies in syllabi also reveals that attendance and assignment policies can significantly impede the success of parenting students, who frequently face challenges such as missing class due to illness or family emergencies. Classroom syllabi dictate the policies of the classroom, and few syllabi demonstrate language directed at parenting students that is inclusive of these needs. On many campuses, this problem is compounded by inflexible course schedules and limited learning options for programs.

### **FINANCIAL POLICY**

Like other community college students, parenting students operate on a limited budget and incur additional expenses not experienced by other students. Inflexible policies and practices that are related to financial aid/support and billing can have disproportionately harmful impacts on parenting students.



## HOUSING POLICY

While there are numerous examples of family-friendly housing on college campuses, housing policies that fail to provide family-friendly housing options can pose challenges for parenting students seeking affordable and suitable housing. This is particularly problematic in cases where no housing options are available on college campuses or where local rents are prohibitively high for a parenting student budget.

## Cultural/Attitudinal Barriers

The culture on campuses is shaped by the things we do, say, and prioritize. Resistance to equity efforts manifests through the structures, systems, policies, and processes we establish.

## STIGMA SURROUNDING PARENTING

There may be a stigma attached to being a young parent or a parent pursuing education while raising children. This societal stigma can create feelings of shame or judgment, leading parenting students to hesitate in seeking support or resources.

## LACK OF REPRESENTATION

Community college environments may lack cultural representation and inclusivity, making parenting students from marginalized communities feel isolated or misunderstood. The absence of role models or support systems that reflect their cultural backgrounds can exacerbate feelings of alienation and hinder their sense of belonging on campus.

## FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS

Providing financial support for family members, such as contributing to household expenses or caring for elderly relatives, may add to the financial strain experienced by parenting students. These financial responsibilities can conflict with the cost of education and limit their ability to pursue higher education.

## LIMITED AWARENESS OF AVAILABLE RESOURCES

Parenting students may lack awareness or understanding of the support services and resources available to them on campus. This can result in underutilization of essential services, such as child care assistance, academic advising, and counseling, further exacerbating their challenges. Frequently, students do not think they qualify for these services.

## GENDER ROLES

Traditional gender roles often dictate that women assume primary caregiving responsibilities within the family. This can translate into parenting students who identify as women feeling pressured to prioritize their roles as mothers over their educational pursuits. They may face challenges in balancing child care duties with attending classes, studying, and completing assignments.

Societal norms may downplay the role of fathers and non-binary parents in caregiving, perpetuating the stereotype that caregiving is primarily a maternal responsibility. This can lead to parenting students who identify as men or non-binary feeling marginalized or overlooked in discussions about parenting responsibilities and support needs. They may encounter barriers in accessing resources or support systems designed primarily for parenting mothers.

## LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

Limited proficiency in the dominant language spoken on campus, typically English, can hinder parenting students' ability to access vital information about academic programs, support services, financial aid, and campus events. Language and communication challenges can result in misunderstandings, missed opportunities, and difficulties in navigating college systems, communicating with faculty, participating in classroom discussions, or accessing resources on campus.



# WHAT WORKS: STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS PARENTING STUDENTS' CHALLENGES

A thoughtful exploration and brainstorming of challenges faced by parenting students in higher education poses a wide range of innovative strategies to create a more supportive and inclusive campus environment for these students.

Creating a family-friendly campus involves implementing a range of strategies to support parenting students and their families. One key aspect is providing accessible and affordable child care services directly on campus ([Dallas College](#), [Glendale Community College](#), and [Schenectady Community College](#)), allowing parenting students to attend classes and study while knowing their children are cared for nearby. Offering flexible class scheduling, including evening, weekend, and online options, can accommodate the diverse schedules and responsibilities of parenting students, ensuring they can balance their academic coursework with family commitments.

Family housing tailored to the needs of parenting students, such as on-campus family apartments or townhouses equipped with child care facilities, can provide a supportive living environment. These housing options not only offer convenience but also foster a sense of community among

parenting students. [Jackson College](#) in Michigan and [Texas State Technical College](#) in Texas offer family housing for their students on campus. At the university level, [Michigan State University](#) and the [University of California](#) in Los Angeles both offer housing options to their parenting students.

Financial assistance programs ([Bakersfield College](#), [Amarillo College](#), and [Community College of Vermont](#)) specifically addressing the additional costs associated with child care, transportation, and family expenses can further alleviate financial burdens for parenting students, enabling them to focus on their studies without undue stress.

Establishing parenting resource centers ([El Paso Community College](#), [Santa Fe Community College](#), and [Pasadena City College](#)), peer mentoring programs, and inclusive campus events can contribute to building a supportive community where parenting students feel welcomed and supported. Flexible leave policies and specialized academic advising services can also help parenting students navigate their academic journey more successfully, addressing their unique challenges and needs.

**Creating a family-friendly campus involves implementing a range of strategies to support parenting students and their families.**



# WHAT WOWS: EFFECTIVE APPROACHES IMPLEMENTED IN THE FIELD

## Dallas College: Using Data To Design Supports

Dallas College used the data from their Hope survey, Trellis survey, and Meadows Mental Health institutional assessment to better understand their students, identify what they need, and provide basic needs support. Through the data, Dallas College learned that their parenting students had different and sometimes more urgent needs.

This prompted the college to apply for a grant to specifically support parenting students at Dallas College. As a result, the college evolved an existing program into its [Family Care Program](#), which is now almost fully scaled. Their initial data boasts an impressive 85% persistence rate for the students who are served.

The program offers three tiers of support that address both academic and academic-adjacent needs. Basic needs and safety are addressed first, which includes connecting students with items such as carbon monoxide detectors, child seats, and cribs. The second tier focuses on nutrition, financial literacy, and mental health through group and individual sessions fostering a sense of belonging. In the third tier, students engage with success coaches to facilitate class reregistration and persistence.

Efforts to institutionalize this program into daily interventions have been successful, with plans to further scale it through additional positions. Partnerships with organizations like the Child Poverty Action Lab have facilitated processes to better connect parenting students with social services like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and the Supplemental Nutrition

Assistance Program (SNAP). Additionally, collaborations with the YMCA have led to on-campus drop-off child care centers, addressing a crucial need for parenting students.

## Florida State College at Jacksonville: Elevating the Student Voice To Build a Family-Friendly Campus

Florida State College at Jacksonville (FSCJ) prioritizes supporting its parenting students through a comprehensive array of services and initiatives. The college has made strides in providing accessible child care options, leveraging partnerships, offering financial assistance, and creating a supportive environment conducive to the success of parenting students. FSCJ's commitment to fostering a family-friendly campus is evident through various programs and accommodations aimed at addressing the unique needs of its parenting students.

In response to feedback from students, FSCJ implemented several initiatives to support parenting students and improve their sense of belonging on campus. This includes the introduction of a dedicated parent liaison who attends classes to foster connections among parents.

The college also offers resources and programming specifically for parents, such as workshops focused on positive discipline funded through the college's CCAMPIS grant. Advising staff receive training to help them better understand and be more responsive to parenting students' needs. A resource closet established with contributions from employees is stocked with essential



items for parenting students, including diapers, nonperishable food items, and toys.

Campus facilities are equipped with amenities such as changing stations and mothers’ rooms, although communication about their availability can be improved. Efforts are ongoing to enhance the family friendliness of advising spaces and extend these improvements to other campus areas like the library. To accommodate students’ diverse schedules, the college has introduced weekend and late-night classes, which have proven popular among those balancing work and child care responsibilities.

### United Tribes Technical College: Supporting the Family Unit

Very few undergraduate students at either two or four-year institutions have the option of living on campus with their families. [United Tribes Technical College](#) (UTTC), a Tribal College and University located in Bismarck, North Dakota, is working to address that barrier.

This issue is important to UTTC as a college, as a significant portion of its student population are parenting students (41% as of fall 2023). Family housing is available to full-time students taking 12 credits in fall and spring and six in the summer. One parent must be a full-time student to be eligible for family housing at UTTC. Housing is available on a first-come, first-served basis and runs on a rolling cycle. UTTC currently has capacity for 96 units, which include a combination of solo efficiencies, one-bedroom, two-bedroom and three-bedroom units. In fall 2023, 25% of UTTC students lived in family housing. In spring 2024, the college accommodated 31% of their parenting students in campus housing.

Students rely on scholarships and financial aid to cover the cost of the housing. They also have a program on campus called Leadership Through Experience through which students can get jobs and apply half of their earnings toward their housing bill. The college requires that students pay rent at the beginning of each month and follow rules similar to renters in other settings. They feel this is a way to assist students in managing their time, their money, and their family homes.



# RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION

The strategies to address the structural, policy/process, and cultural/attitudinal obstacles faced by parenting students can be categorized into various themes, including academic, familial, financial, and community-related aspects. Implementing a combination of these strategies grounded in institutional data, can contribute to a more supportive and inclusive environment for parenting students, enhancing their ability to succeed academically while navigating the challenges associated with parenting.

## Leverage Data To Understand and Serve Parenting Students

Colleges can create data structures and processes to systematically identify parenting students, understand their needs, measure their success, and understand the impact of the services provided to them. Understanding our students and understanding their success are two critical areas of student data analysis.

### UNDERSTANDING OUR STUDENT POPULATION DATA

Ideally, parenting students are identified and connected as they enter a college. The approach to collecting student data should be intentional. Getting to know your students' foundational demographic data will help inform your strategies and enable you to achieve better outcomes for your parenting students. This will involve implementing a multi-faceted approach, including

surveying enrolled students to inquire about their parental status; collaborating with campus resources, such as student services and financial aid offices, to gather relevant information; and leveraging existing databases or enrollment records to identify students with dependents.

Outreach efforts can be conducted through various channels, such as email communications, social media campaigns, and student organizations, to encourage parenting students to self-identify and seek assistance if needed. The collected data could be used to inform the development of tailored support services, policies, and programs to enhance the academic success and overall well-being of parenting students within the college community.

**Understanding our students and understanding their success are two critical areas of student data analysis.**

### STUDENT OUTCOMES/ PERFORMANCE METRICS

Data can be a powerful tool when developing services for students or measuring their academic outcomes. But data that quantifies the use of supports can be used to scale programs, and, more importantly, student success rates can amplify the impact of those supports.

Further, analyzing the data in a disaggregated approach can help colleges focus on specific groups and provide intentional supports for those students. Building an evaluation plan for these programs that provide dedicated supports to parenting students can help educators better understand the impact of the supports they offer and strategically plan for future supports.



To help support colleges with this important process, the Urban Institute published a guide in March 2024 to assist colleges in collecting parenting student data. Reference the Urban Institute brief [“How Should Colleges Collect Parenting Student Data? \(version 1\)”](#) (Sick & Anderson, 2024).

## Provide Flexible Options in Academic and Advising Support

Supporting parenting students should occur both in and out of the classroom. To ensure parenting students have an engaging and inclusive academic experience, colleges should create opportunities for academic flexibility and support that include the following:

### FLEXIBLE CLASS SCHEDULES AND POLICIES

Flexibility in the classroom can take several forms. Colleges should work to provide flexible scheduling options, including evening and weekend classes,

flexible-start courses, and shortened-term courses to accommodate the diverse needs of parenting students who are balancing family and work schedules.

Flexibility can also involve offering courses in multiple modalities that provide parenting students with options for attendance. For example, online and hybrid courses provide flexibility for parenting students who may face challenges with on-campus attendance due to child care or transportation issues. In theory, by leveraging all the options available for delivering course material, a student who misses a class for any reason will never really be “absent” and will be able to access material on a schedule that meets their needs. Other critical academic supports include access to necessary technology, such as laptops and high-speed internet, and supports for parenting students participating in online courses.

### ENGAGED FACULTY AND ADVISORS

Ensuring that parenting students are set up for success early involves providing well-trained advocates, such as academic advisors and faculty members. Training for faculty and advisors to better understand the lived experiences of parenting students enables them to become more effective advocates for these students.

Advisors should have expert knowledge of the supports available to parenting students both on and off campus in the community. They should also be able to provide tailored guidance on academic planning and be able to meet parenting students where they are to ensure they have course schedules that work with potentially challenging personal schedules.

Faculty members should have the capacity to connect parenting students with supports on campus. They do not necessarily need to be the experts, but they should know the campus expert and make the connection for students. Additionally, faculty members should be encouraged to incorporate flexibility in class policies such as attendance and create opportunities for students to engage with content if they need to miss a class due to unforeseen family issues.



## Provide Financial Support in a Variety of Forms and Sources

In a recent study [“The Child Care Barrier: The Impacts of Inaccessible and Costly Child Care for Student Parents”](#) by Generation Hope, financial supports were identified as being critical for student success. The report highlights that out of 140 students surveyed, 82% of respondents reported living below the poverty line (below \$30,000 annual income). This reinforces the importance of connecting students to financial supports (Johns & Breakstone, 2023).

Parenting students juggle multiple financial obligations, and a major expense for parenting students is child care. In general, child care availability varies across campuses and in communities and can be prohibitively expensive for parents who are also students. Critical sources of financial support available to support parenting students include financial aid, scholarships and grants, emergency aid, and opportunities for work-study. Providing parenting students with as much support and flexibility with tuition and fees, as well as ensuring that they are aware of and connected to basic need supports and emergency aid, can keep students enrolled.

### FINANCIAL AID, SCHOLARSHIPS, AND GRANTS

Parenting students should be connected to financial supports early in their student experience. Supporting students in filling out the FAFSA and exploring institutional grants or scholarships can build a solid foundation of support and relieve stress. Many colleges have grant-funded programs on campus for parenting students, such as CCAMPIS grants, which offer child care assistance grants. Leveraging data to identify parenting students early on can aid in the connection to these critical programs.

### EMERGENCY AID

Colleges should establish emergency financial assistance programs to support parenting



students, and this information should be readily available to faculty, staff, and students so it is an option for students facing unexpected financial challenges. These resources should be easy to find and to access without burdensome documentation or paperwork.

### CAMPUS EMPLOYMENT

Finally, creating opportunities for parenting students to work on campus can help alleviate financial stress and worry. Campus employment can also help students build a supportive network that can build a sense of belonging and keep them engaged. Colleges can address this need by expanding work-study programs that provide on-campus employment opportunities suitable for parenting students.



## Connect to Family and Personal Supports

Connecting parenting students to holistic supports that address personal and family needs can keep them enrolled. Leveraging institutional data to identify parenting students and integrating these critical supports into their student experience can get them connected sooner. Colleges should be able to address areas of need, such as food and housing insecurity, mental health, legal and tax support, transportation, and financial counseling. If the college does not have the capacity to provide these support services on campus, they may consider leveraging their local community organizations and agencies to bolster their supports to parenting students.

Parenting students have busy, complex lives, and many of them must balance work, family, and school. To meet students where they are, it is important for colleges to offer supports in a flexible format through multiple modalities. For example, many parenting students engage in online courses

and programs. Ensuring that equitable supports are offered in a virtual space can engage parenting students and make sure they have the help they need.

### PEER CONNECTION

Students feel like they belong when they feel connected, respected, accepted, and valued. One way to help students feel connected is by creating parenting resource centers and opportunities for networking and peer connection. Parenting students are excellent advocates and resources for each other. However, many parenting students report feeling isolated and alone on campus. Colleges can introduce parenting support programs that offer workshops, resources, and networking opportunities for parenting students.

### DEDICATED SUPPORT

Another way to help students feel like they belong is to ensure that campus is the place they know they can go to become connected with what they need. Each parenting student should have a person



to whom they know they can go for support. This begins by building relationships with students so that they feel valued and that they have someone who cares for them. Having a network of both campus advocates and peer supports can help reduce stigma and shame around being a parenting student on campus.

## FAMILY-FRIENDLY CAMPUSES

Finally, campuses can be more welcoming to parenting students by creating structures and processes to be more family friendly. Family-friendly colleges better understand that children are a source of pride and motivation and not a liability for parenting students. Providing parenting students with the opportunity to connect and network with other parenting students can build community and a sense of belonging that contributes to successful completion.

Family-friendly structures include child care on campus, inclusive study spaces that allow children, lactation rooms, family housing, and campus events that are suited for students with children. If colleges do not have the capacity to offer all these supports, they may consider working in their community to build partnerships that can provide options outside of campus.

Colleges may also consider organizing campus events and gatherings, specifically inviting students and their families to build additional opportunities for parenting students to network with other students and connect to critical campus resources. Prioritizing parenting students and making our campus intentionally family friendly can help reduce stigma and bias, improve parenting students' well-being, and build belonging.

## Align Community Resources

### COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Engage with community partners to expand access to supports such as parenting support programs, health care services, cost-effective transportation, food, housing, child care, clothing/diapers, and tax

and legal assistance. Colleges can also look to their local community to build employment partnerships that create job and/or internship opportunities for parenting students that emphasize flexibility and family-friendly practices.

## LOCAL, STATE, AND FEDERAL RESOURCES

It can be beneficial to parenting students to connect with knowledgeable advisors on campus who can help them apply for public benefits. Eligibility is determined once an individual applies, and applications may be required for each program.

Public benefit programs that may be helpful to parenting students include the following:

- **The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)** program is a federal program intended to aid and support low-income families.
- **The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)** is the federal government's anti-hunger program, providing food assistance to low-income people nationwide.
- **Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS)** program, a federal grant program that provides funds to support or establish campus-based child care, primarily serving the needs of low-income students enrolled in higher education.
- **Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF)** is a federal program that provides broader child care support and is administered by the Department of Health and Human Services to subsidize child care expenses for eligible families.



# CONCLUSION

Parenting students in community colleges bring unique strengths and diverse perspectives to the academic environment, yet they face challenges shaped by family responsibilities, cultural expectations, and work obligations. Their educational journey may also become challenging as they navigate the structures and processes at colleges. Their resilience, resourcefulness, and ability to multitask often lead them to excel academically despite the hurdles they encounter.

Institutions can empower parenting students to thrive by providing flexible learning options, culturally responsive support systems, and improved access to child care and financial aid. This guide can provide actionable insights and strategies that help colleges better understand and support parenting students, ultimately enhancing their academic success and positively impacting the lives of both students and their families.



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## **ABOUT THE ADVISING SUCCESS NETWORK**

Formed in 2018, the Advising Success Network is a dynamic network of national organizations partnering to support institutions through a holistic approach to advising redesign that supports students' personal, academic, and career goals. The network addresses the multifaceted needs of colleges and universities to design a meaningful student experience and improve institutional retention and completion rates for Black, Latinx/a/o, Indigenous, Asian, Pacific Islander, and poverty-affected students.

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Achieving the Dream (ATD) is a partner and champion of more than 300 community colleges across the country. Drawing on our expert coaches, groundbreaking programs, and national peer network, we provide institutions with integrated, tailored support for every aspect of their work — from foundational capacities such as leadership, data, and equity to intentional strategies for supporting students holistically, building K–12 partnerships, and more. We call this Whole College Transformation. Our vision is for every college to be a catalyst for equitable and economically vibrant communities. We know that with the right partner and the right approach, colleges can drive access, completion rates, and employment outcomes — so that all students can access life-changing learning that propels them into community-changing careers.

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