

Motivated but Underserved: Supporting Student Parents on the Path to a Bachelor's Degree

Student parents—college students with dependent children—are highly motivated to succeed in college. They pursue degrees not only to achieve economic mobility for themselves but also to secure a better future for their children.¹ Despite their high aspirations, they encounter significant barriers that contribute to frequent stop-outs—withdrawing from college for some period and returning later.²

When discussing student parents, the focus often centers on sub-baccalaureate degrees and credentials such as associate's degrees or certificates earned at community colleges, since these programs are of shorter duration and can more quickly support career advancement or entry into new fields, even for those already employed while pursuing their education. While these credentials can lead to good jobs,³ **bachelor's degrees open the door to a larger proportion (34 percent) of all good jobs** compared to associate's degrees (10 percent) or some college/certificates (12 percent),⁴ and serve as a gateway to graduate and professional degrees.

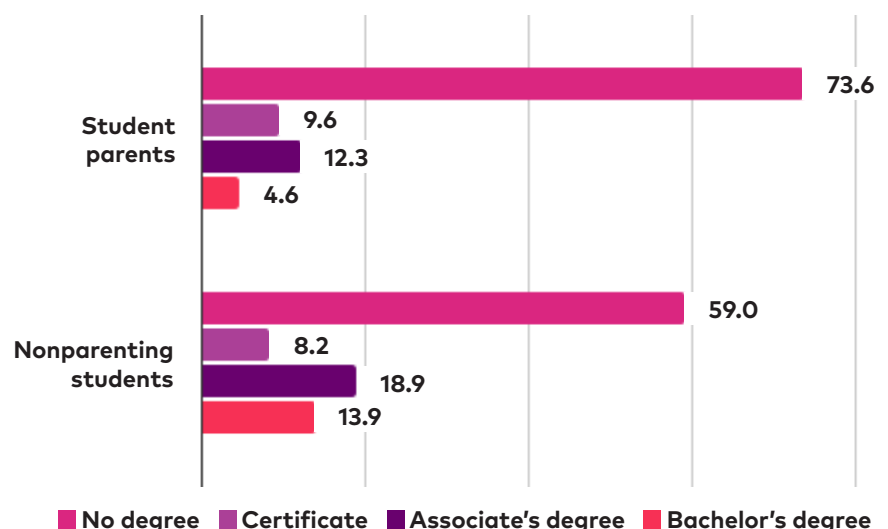
The economic advantages of bachelor's degrees are also very clear. **Median lifetime earnings are much higher for those with a bachelor's degree** (\$2,003,000) than for those with an associate's degree (\$1,386,000) or those with some college but no degree (\$1,120,000).⁵ This makes bachelor's degree completion a critical outcome for students raising children. Since more than half of student parents are enrolled in community colleges,⁶ improving transfer and bachelor's degree completion rates for this population should be a policy priority for postsecondary institutions as well as policymakers.

Completion Outcomes for Student Parents

Six years after beginning coursework at a community college, only 4.6 percent of student parents earned a bachelor's degree as their highest credential, compared to 13.9 percent of nonparenting students (Figure 1). Similarly, student parents' associate's degree completion rates lag behind those of nonparenting students (12.3 and 18.9 percent, respectively).

Outcomes are particularly inequitable for student mothers, who make up about three-quarters of all student parents.⁷ Only 3.4 percent complete a bachelor's degree within six years, compared to 7.0 percent of student fathers (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Highest Degree Earned Six Years After First Enrolling in Community College



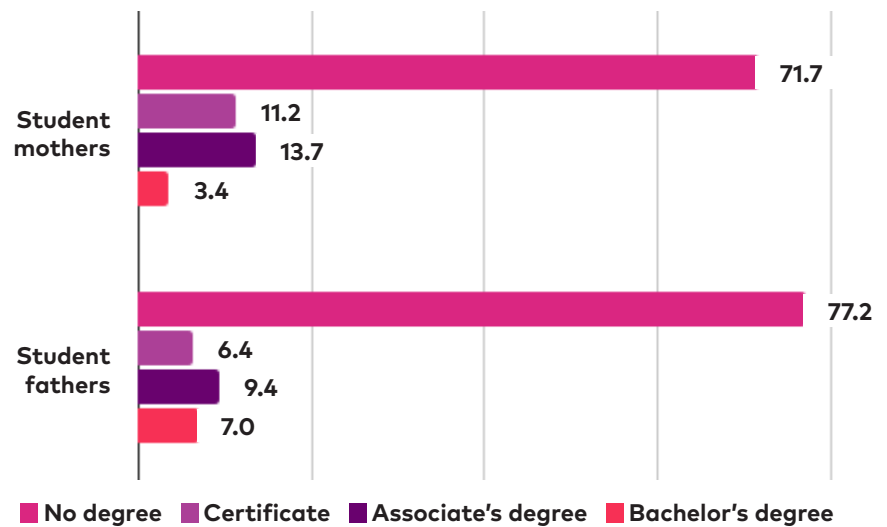
Source: IWPR generated this figure using data from the National Center for Education Statistics, Beginning Postsecondary Students, 2012/2017. The analysis can be recreated with the variables ATHTY6Y, DEPCCHILD, and FSECTOR using DataLab (<https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/powerstats/table/nvklue>; free account required).

Low bachelor's degree completion rates highlight the challenges student parents face in navigating transfer pathways.

Some of those challenges are shared by all students, including fragmented and inconsistent transfer policies across states and institutions; lack of clear, accurate information about transfer requirements, limited advising and guidance; and broader systemic issues such as affordability and lack of strong collaboration between two- and four-year institutions.⁸

For student parents, these barriers are compounded by additional responsibilities and constraints. College affordability becomes even more challenging with added expenses of raising children. Limited access to affordable child care, lack of reliable transportation, and housing insecurity further impede their ability to persist.⁹ These challenges not only affect their day-to-day academic progress but also potentially discourage them from pursuing longer-term goals such as transferring and completing a bachelor's degree.

Figure 2. Highest Degree Earned Six Years After First Enrolling in Community College for Student Mothers and Fathers



Source: IWPR generated this figure using data from the National Center for Education Statistics, Beginning Postsecondary Students, 2012/2017. The analysis can be recreated with the variables ATHTY6Y, GENDER, DEPCHILD, and FSECTOR using DataLab (<https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/powerstats/table/dzvwra>; free account required).

Note: Bachelor's degree completion rates for student mothers and fathers should be interpreted with caution, as the standard error represents between 30 percent and 50 percent of the estimate.

The Need for Student Parent-Centered Policies and Practices

Given these realities, it is critical to examine transfer pathways through the lens of student parents because policies and practices designed for the general student population may not adequately support them. It is essential to understand how student parents engage with transfer processes and navigate transfer pipelines, as well as their post-transfer experiences. In addition, policy solutions for student parents must be holistic, addressing not only their academic needs but also the challenges they face outside of the classroom that directly impact their ability to persist and succeed.

To learn more about related policy solutions, explore IWPR's Federal Policy Solutions to Advance Gender Equity brief on [Supporting Student Parents](#).

This Quick Figure was prepared by Dr. Afet Dundar, with fact-checking by Dr. Jennifer Turner and Miranda Peterson, and feedback from Dr. Kate Bahn. It was made possible with support from the ECMC Foundation.

Endnotes

1. Renee Ryberg, Katelyn Rust, Zabryna Balén, Yash Morimoto, Catron Allred, and Rachel Kutcher, *Survey of Parenting Students in New Mexico Helps Us Understand Their Needs*, report (Rockville, MD: Child Trends, 2024), https://studentparentaction.org/assets/r-file/SurveyParentingStudents_ChildTrends_July2024.pdf.
2. Jennifer Turner and Afet Dundar, *Advancing Equity in Attainment for Black Single Mothers in College: Understanding Their Needs and Supporting Their Success*, IWPR report #C524 (Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research, April 2024), <https://iwpr.org/advancing-equity-in-attainment-for-black-single-mothers-in-college-understanding-their-needs-and-supporting-their-success/>.
3. Anthony P. Carnevale, Jeff Strohl, Kathryn Peltier Campbell, Artem Gulish, Ban Cheah, Emma Nyhof, and Lillian Fix, *Learning and Earning by Degrees: Gains in College Degree Attainment Have Enriched the Nation and Every State, but Racial and Gender Inequality Persists*, report (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2024), https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/CEW-attainment-gains-full_report.pdf. Good jobs are defined as jobs that pay middle-class wages.
4. Carnevale et al., *Learning and Earning by Degrees*.
5. Carnevale et al., *Learning and Earning by Degrees*.
6. Theresa Anderson, Afet Dundar, Sheron Gittens, Renee Ryberg, Rebecca Schreiber, Laney Taylor, Jessica Warren, and Kate Westaby, "Who Are Undergraduates with Dependent Children? An Updated Overview of Student-Parent Characteristics Using 2020 Data," brief (SPARK Collaborative, 2024), <https://studentparentaction.org/assets/r-file/Who-Are-Undergraduates-with-Dependent-Children.pdf>.
7. Anderson et al, "Who Are Undergraduates with Dependent Children?"
8. Adela Soliz and Hidadhis Mesa, "Improving Community College to University Transfer," *Education Finance and Policy* 20 no. 3 (2025): 516–530, <https://direct.mit.edu/edfp/article/20/3/516/127479/Improving-Community-College-to-University-Transfer>.
9. Turner and Dundar, *Advancing Equity in Attainment*.