

Head Start-College Partnership to Promote Student Parent Family Success:

A Roadmap to Guide Collaboration

Introduction

Collaboration between colleges and Head Start programs holds promise for promoting the educational and economic well-being of college students with young children.

Roughly 1.8 million student parents who have children under age six are income-eligible for Head Start services.¹ Head Start provides access to high-quality, affordable early learning opportunities for children alongside wraparound supports for parents which can help families achieve economic security by helping to facilitate parents' attainment of college credentials. Head Start-college collaboration can also bring important benefits to colleges and universities as well as Head Start programs (Figure 1).

This guide is designed to help college and university administrators, campus child care directors, early learning faculty and staff, and other campus stakeholders to evaluate the needs of their parenting student body and assess whether a collaboration with Head Start is right for their institutions. It illustrates the first steps a college or university might take to evaluate whether a partnership with Head Start is a good fit for its campus, and how to begin conversations with a local Head Start grantee or provider about how collaboration might be mutually beneficial. The guide was informed by in-depth research on Head Start-college partnerships and by feedback from practitioners and advocates of Head Start-college partnerships around the country.²

1. Institute for Women's Policy Research analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015-16 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:16).

2. To read more about IWPR's study on Head Start-college partnerships, see Barbara Gault, Lindsey Reichlin Cruse, Tessa Holtzman, and Susana Contreras-Mendez. 2019. *Head Start-College Partnerships as a Strategy for Promoting Family Economic Success: A Study of Benefits, Challenges, and Promising Programs*. Report, IWPR #C485. Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research. <<https://iwpr.org/iwpr-issues/student-parent-success-initiative/head-start-college-partnerships-as-a-strategy-for-promoting-family-economic-success-a-study-of-benefits-challenges-and-promising-programs/>> (accessed February 24, 2020).

FIGURE 1.

Benefits of Collaboration for Higher Education, Head Start, and Families

Higher Education Gains Access to...

- Supports for student parents that contribute to improved persistence and completion rates.
- Wraparound services for student parent families that help to build a family-friendly campus and attract prospective student parents.
- Access to high-quality sites-for student training and practicums.
- Additional funding and resources for early learning services and family supports.

Head Start Gains Access to...

- A source of families who are eligible for Head Start, which can bolster program enrollment.
- A pathway for Head Start teachers/staff and parents to attain workforce credentials and training.
- Access to institutional resources such as classroom space, custodial services, utilities, human resources departments.
- Access to student trainees and work-study students who are studying early childhood education, nursing, or related fields and who can support Head Start staff.

Student Parents Gain Access to...

- Affordable, high-quality, and convenient early learning opportunities for their children.
- Wraparound supports that promote their individual goals, including college persistence and completion.
- Improved chances of attaining a postsecondary credential and establishing family self-sufficiency and economic security.
- Access to child development and health resources, assessments, and referrals to services.

Data-Driven Case Making

Document Student Parents' Demand and Head Start Eligibility

Deciding whether partnering with Head Start may be right for your campus requires understanding student parents' early learning needs and preferences, as well as needs surrounding family well-being and stability, which can affect eligibility for Head Start services. Compiling and analyzing available data on student parents' need for care and financial status, as well as the extent to which they may be experiencing other barriers such as homelessness, housing insecurity, food insecurity, intimate partner violence, (dis)ability, or mental health issues, is important for evaluating the level of need for Head Start services among the college student parent population.

These data will also be helpful for building a case for partnership with the local Head Start grantee. Head Start programs are required to conduct regular community needs assessments to ensure their services are meeting the needs of eligible families in their service area. Documenting the needs of student parents at local colleges and universities can help identify families who may benefit from and be eligible for Head Start services but who may not currently have access to them.

Identify Available Data to Provide Information about Students with Caregiving Demands

Sources of data on students with children could include: data from the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), enrollment and registration forms (including for campus family housing), Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) grant applications and reports, campus child care center roster and waitlist information, #RealCollege survey results, campus advising or counseling offices, women's and LGBTQ+ centers, transfer centers, student services centers, veteran and DACA student resource centers, and other sources. Quantitative and qualitative data on students with children may be collected by a range of campus stakeholders that may or may not be aware of or sharing data with each other.

Analyze Data to Evaluate Student Need and Head Start Eligibility

Collaborate with the institutional research office and other relevant offices, such as financial aid and TRIO programs (e.g. Upward Bound and Student Support Services), to compile relevant data and conduct analyses that allow for an assessment of the number of students with caregiving needs on campus, their financial status, their academic outcomes, and other factors that may affect their Head Start eligibility.

Share Key Findings with Campus Stakeholders, Students, and Local Head Start Programs

Releasing anonymous, aggregate data on students with children and their experiences in college, including their caregiving and financial needs and academic outcomes, will both communicate attention to and awareness of the student parent population and provide vital information that Head Start can use to inform community needs assessments and demonstrate student demand for Head Start services.³

3. Data that are released publicly describing student characteristics must follow the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) (20 U.S.C. § 1232g; 34 CFR Part 99), which protects the privacy of student education records.

Improving Data Collection on Student Parents

While most institutions of higher education do not collect data on whether students care for dependent children, there are a range of methods to gather information on student parents' presence on college campuses, their academic outcomes, their caregiving demands, and their need for supportive services that can promote family well-being.

1. Student surveys and focus groups can provide important qualitative information on student parents' child care needs and preferences.

The [Family-Friendly Campus Toolkit](#) is one resource that can help institutions improve knowledge of student parents and their college experiences. It provides a survey instrument, focus group guidance, and other data collection resources for campus-based users

2. Institutionalized data collection can provide consistent information on the size and outcomes of the student parent population on a given campus.

To the extent possible, collecting information on the age and number of student parents' children and their family income provides important insight into their need for Head Start services. Institutions can add questions to enrollment forms, registration forms or surveys, programmatic software, campus climate surveys, or other methods, to collect these data. Monroe Community College in Rochester, NY, for example, collects information on students' parent status and age of children through a required survey completed every term during course registration, allowing it to capture changes in students' parent status and likely need for caregiving support.

3. Head Start program data can help illustrate the presence of college students who are already benefiting from Head Start services, as well as communicate interest among Head Start parents in pursuing postsecondary education and training.

Data from the [Program Information Report](#) (PIR), released by the Office of Head Start, are accessible to the public. They include information on parents' current educational attainment, whether they are currently enrolled in education or training, and if they have set a family goal of attaining additional education or training.

Learning from Experience: Leverage Peer Relationships to Learn from Existing Partnerships

According to a study by the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR), roughly 60 U.S. institutions have partnerships with Head Start to serve college students with children⁴. Connecting with institutions with existing Head Start partnerships can help clarify whether Head Start collaboration is the right option for meeting the needs of student parents on your campus. Refer to [IWPR's report](#) for more information on the benefits, challenges, and factors affecting the success of Head Start-college partnerships to inform the questions you want to ask and for an initial list of existing partnerships to which you can reach out. Because IWPR's list is not exhaustive, be sure to conduct additional outreach to identify other partnerships that may exist.

Finding Head Start-College Partnerships in Your State or Region

The following sources may be able to help identify partnerships in your area:

- Your campus child care center director
- Peer institutions with campus child care centers
- The [National Coalition of Campus Children's Centers](#)
- Your [Head Start regional office](#), which oversees the administration of grants and the provision of training and technical assistance for Head Start grantees in 12 regions
- [Your state's Head Start Association](#)

Questions for Peer Institutions That Partner with Head Start

- How did the partnership develop and who was involved? What were the motivations for forming the partnership?
- How does the partnership serve student parents? How many parents from the college do you serve on average?
- Does your institution provide financial or in-kind support to the partnership?
- What types of supports do family engagement staff provide to parents who are enrolled at the college? Have you observed any impact on student parents' outcomes as a result of this support?
- What are the benefits of this collaboration? What are the challenges and how have you worked to overcome them?
- Were there any key relationships, processes, or other factors that facilitated the partnership's establishment? What factors—such as the administration's buy-in—were necessary? What factors might threaten the development and/or success of the partnership?
- If we pursue a partnership with Head Start, what would your advice be to make it a successful collaboration?

4. Gault et al. 2019. *Head Start-College Partnerships as a Strategy for Promoting Family Economic Success: A Study of Benefits, Challenges, and Promising Programs*.

Building a Bridge Across Systems: Connect with Local Head Start Grantees and Providers

Equipped with key information on student parents' needs and insight from peers on possibilities for partnership, connect with the local Head Start grantee or program to start a dialogue about possible areas of collaboration and mutual benefit. Head Start providers are generally part of a network of programs under the umbrella of a grantee that serves a specific service area.

Identifying Local Head Start Grantees and Programs

The Office of Head Start's Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center (ECLCK) provides tools to identify local programs and grantees:

- The [Grantee Service Profiles tool](#) provides contact information for local grantees, searchable by zip code.
- Identify individual Head Start programs by location and type of service using the [Head Start Center Locator](#).

Additional stakeholders may be able to facilitate introductions, identify opportunities, and provide other insight, such as:

- The [Head Start regional office](#) for your state
- [Your state's Head Start Association](#)
- [State collaboration offices](#), which facilitate partnerships between Head Start and other state agencies—while they mostly focus on partnerships within early childhood education, partnering with higher education systems or institutions is an opportunity to make progress on family economic security goals, which is part of their mandate from OHS
- Local school districts and state pre-kindergarten programs with Head Start grants
- Social service agencies, such as Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) programs, which often work with Head Start

Questions for Head Start Grantees and Programs

- What populations does the grantee/program currently serve?
- What services does the grantee/program provide (type of program, hours, ages served, total program capacity)?
- What areas of need have past community need assessments identified? Have past assessments ever examined need among college student parents?
- Have they ever worked with a higher education institution before? If yes, in what capacity? What have been the outcomes?
- Has the grantee or program identified gaps in services for areas of need identified by community assessments?
- Has the grantee or program faced issues with under-enrollment?
- What does the grantee need that the institution might be able to provide (e.g. more classroom space, opportunities for staff to upskill, assistance with child screenings and assessments)? Could collaboration help meet these needs?
- What are current Head Start parents' educational/training goals? How could collaboration with institutions of higher education help families meet these goals?

Understanding Your Local Head Start Grantee & Providers

Head Start is a federally funded two-generation program overseen by the Office of Head Start (OHS) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. It pairs high-quality early childhood education with individualized support for parents to provide comprehensive services to families. OHS awards Head Start grants on a competitive basis. Local grantees may provide services directly or may contract with individual providers to serve families in designated service areas.

Common Head Start Staff Positions

- **Program Directors** provide programmatic oversight for Head Start grants and oversee individual providers. Their approval and buy-in will be integral to a successful partnership.
- **Center Managers** manage Head Start centers and oversee funding, enrollment, recruitment, and quality. They will have key insight into how a partnership might benefit their program and will likely serve as a primary liaison to student-facing staff at the college.
- **Family Services Managers** and Staff work with Head Start families to set and meet self-sufficiency and family goals through individualized, culturally competent case management. They will understand families' needs, including their educational goals, and will know if any families are currently enrolled in education or training.
- **Classroom Education Staff** provide nurturing and responsive educational experiences to children to support social, emotional, behavioral, and language development and prepare children for kindergarten. They have unique insight into the needs of children and families.
- **Child Development and Disability Specialists/Managers** provide assessments, services, and referrals for children with developmental concerns.
- **Health Services Managers/Professionals** manage the delivery of nutritional and mental health services to children and families. (They are often consultants.)

About Head Start Parental and Family Services

Head Start Family Engagement programming strives to improve family economic well-being, create positive parent-child relationships, and empower families to be life-long educators, learners, and advocates. To that end, Head Start programs work to:

- Improve school readiness of children ages 0-5 from families with low incomes by providing programming to meet their emotional, social, health, nutritional, and psychological needs.
- Engage parents in self-sufficiency goals, including connecting families to workforce training programs and other educational and career opportunities.
- Provide referrals to help families access social services, such as housing and food assistance, and mental and physical health services.
- Offer immediate assistance to help families access services in times of crisis and trauma, such as addiction and homelessness.

Designing a Partnership: Determine the Best Model for Collaboration

Collaboration between Head Start and higher education can take a number of forms, with formal and informal options depending on the needs, capacity, resources, and interest of respective partners. IWPR's research on existing Head Start-college partnerships identified a series of program types which these partnerships tend to take (Figure 2; a detailed explanation of these partnership models can be found in [IWPR's report](#)).

FIGURE 2.

Examples of Head Start-College Partnership Models

Service Provision to Student Parent Families

On-Campus Programs

- Head Start slots offered in conjunction with campus child care.
- Establishing a standalone Head Start program or classroom on campus

Off-Campus Programs

- Designate services for student parents at a local off-campus Head Start program.
- Develop a credential program for parents served by a local off-campus Head Start provider.
- Create a referral pipeline between the campus and a local Head Start program to direct students who may be eligible for services (could be formal or informal).

Building Bridges between Head Start and Higher Ed

Provide current Head Start parents with resources about enrollment opportunities at the college and host events to introduce Head Start families to campus.

Collaborate with Head Start to provide opportunities for college students who need volunteer hours or on-site practicums.

Considerations for Deciding on How to Partner

There are a range of considerations for both higher education institutions and Head Start grantees or programs that must be taken into account when deciding the best way to collaborate to serve student parent families. These considerations include, but may not be limited to:

- **What student parents need.** Information on student parents' presence on campus and their caregiving demands can reveal how collaboration with Head Start could meet students' needs.

Examples of student needs that could affect approaches to collaboration include: hours of care (e.g. part-time versus full-time), type of care (e.g., home-based versus center-based), ages for which care is needed (e.g., infants and toddlers), preferences around location of care (e.g., in the community/near parents' homes or on campus), transportation needs.

- **What the Head Start grantee needs and has capacity for.** Grantees may be motivated to collaborate by their own programmatic needs or interest in growing their ability to reach more families.

Examples of programmatic needs could include: enrollment challenges faced by existing providers, interest in applying for duration funding (to provide full-day services), interest among existing Head Start families in earning postsecondary credentials, and needs for professional education for staff.

- **What the campus can offer and level of buy-in.** Campus capacity is a major factor in determining the nature of collaboration with Head Start, as well as buy-in from institutional leadership.

Examples of factors that could affect how partnerships are structured include: whether the campus operates a campus child care center, whether that center has extra classroom space or would be interested in integrating Head Start standards into existing services, need for diversified funding sources for campus child care, the presence of an early education lab school, and willingness among institutional leadership to devote financial or in-kind resources to the partnership.

Setting Up for Success

IWPR's research identified a number of key factors for making collaboration between Head Start and higher education institutions work (a full explanation of these factors can be found in [IWPR's report](#)). Throughout the existence of the partnership, both higher education institutions and Head Start grantees should strive to:

- Ensure consistent communication and intentional relationship building among Head Start center directors, program leaders, college administration, faculty, staff, and students. Relationship building should start at the earliest stages of collaboration and continue as the partnership develops and matures.
- Promote awareness and buy-in from the campus community by acknowledging mission alignment and areas of mutual benefit. This buy-in will help stabilize the partnership as it works to overcome roadblocks that may arise. Sharing student parent testimonies is a powerful way to build awareness of the partnership.
- Support student parents where they are. Head Start staff who have access to, and knowledge of, campus services and systems are well-positioned to provide individualized support to help student parents meet their educational and family goals.
- Provide continuous care for student parents families using Head Start services. Student parents have complex schedules and family needs, which can sometimes lead to temporary breaks from enrollment. Partnerships that prioritize services for the children of students should ensure adequate flexibility to adapt to the non-linear nature of student parent college enrollment and ensure that their children have uninterrupted access to care.

Conclusion

Collaboration between Head Start programs and higher education represents an opportunity to provide essential support to student parents and their families, promoting family economic security while bringing benefits to colleges and universities and Head Start. Head Start-college collaborations may not be the right solution for every community; but in places where partnerships are a good fit, they can leverage the strengths and resources of two major educational systems to better serve children and parents together.

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