

Head Start-College Partnership to Promote Student Parent Family Success

A Roadmap to Guide Collaboration



IWPR #C500
June 2021

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 one million undergraduate student parents with children under age six are income-eligible for Head Start, and their ability to complete their educational programs is linked to their access to affordable sources of early care and learning for their children.¹

Roughly one million undergraduate student parents with children under age six are income-eligible for Head Start, and their ability to complete their educational programs is linked to their access to affordable sources of early care and learning for their children.

Head Start, the largest early learning program in the United States, provides free federally funded, high-quality early learning for children alongside wraparound supports for parents. Its mission includes helping families achieve self-sufficiency and economic security, such as by helping parents access and succeed in college and workforce training.

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) and the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System.

By partnering together, Head Start and higher education institutions can encourage student parent success; help colleges and universities make progress on institutional priorities, like improved persistence and completion rates; provide benefits to students and surrounding communities; and improve Head Start programs' ability to help children thrive and families build an economically mobile future.

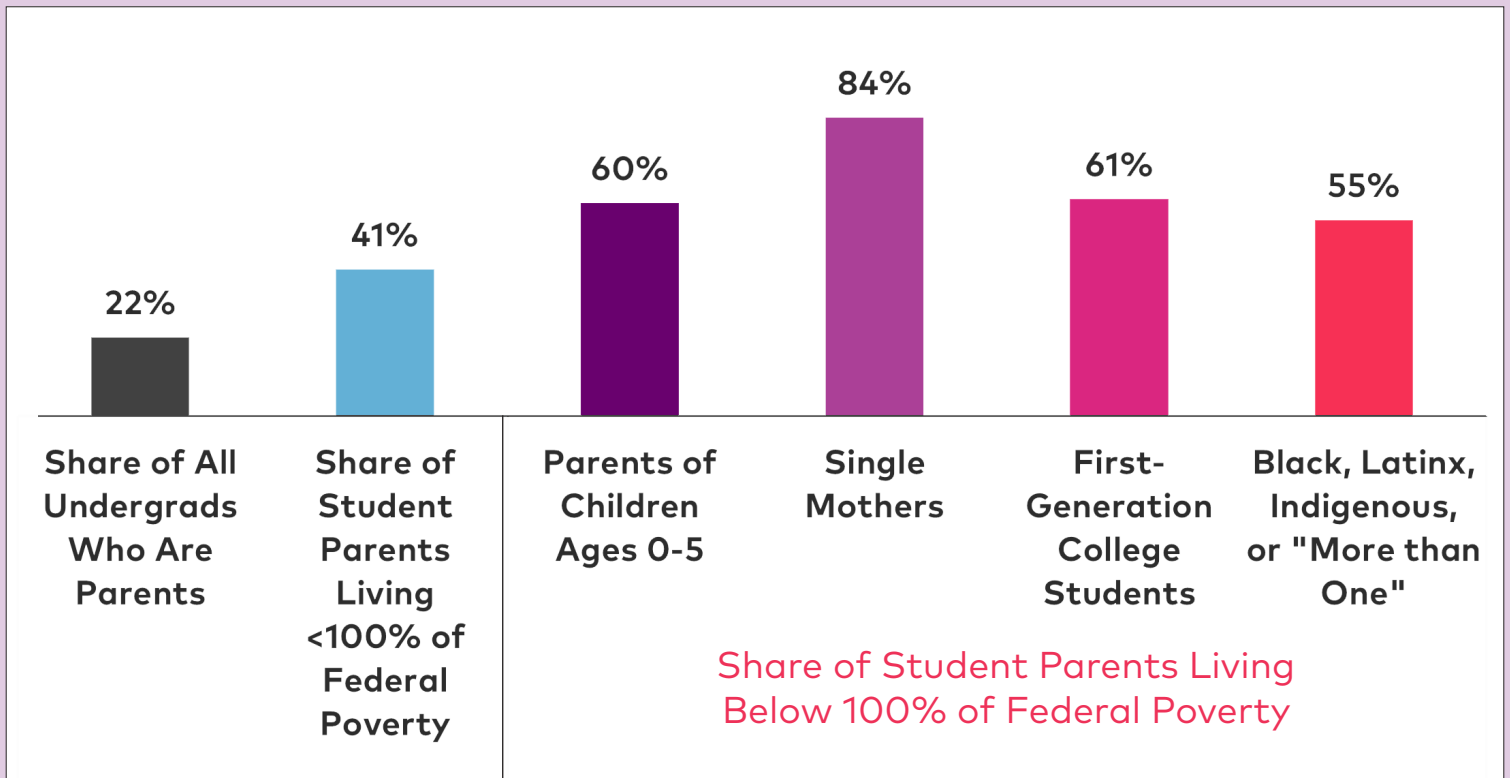
This guide is designed for college and university administrators, campus child care directors and staff, early learning faculty, student services staff and counselors, and other campus stakeholders to evaluate the needs of their parenting student body and assess whether a collaboration with Head Start is right for their institutions. It describes the first steps a college or university can 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.

This "roadmap" was informed by in-depth research from the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) on Head Start-college partnerships published in 2019 and by feedback from campus child care practitioners, student parent advocates, and Head Start-college partnership directors who took part in focus groups during the month of March 2021. An earlier version of IWPR's "roadmap" was published in September 2020, on which this version is based.

The Benefits of Head Start-College Partnerships

Nearly four million college students are raising children while pursuing college, representing nearly a quarter of all students (Figure 1). More than two in five student parents live with incomes below the federal poverty line. They hold multiple identities, such as being single parents, first-generation college students, and students of color—specifically Black, Latinx, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and Native American/Alaska Native students—who tend to experience structural barriers to educational access and success. Student parents are also more likely to report experiencing food- and housing-insecurity than their peers without children.

Figure 1. Student Parents are Likely to Live in Poverty and Hold Intersecting Student Identities



Note: Indigenous student parents in this graph include Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander and Native American/Alaska Native student parents.

Source: 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).

These students [bring](#) a deep commitment to their educational goals, impressive time management skills, significant professional and life experience, and diverse perspectives to their campuses. Yet student parents are [nearly twice as likely](#) to leave college without a degree or certificate within six years of enrolling than their peers without children—despite having [higher](#) grade point averages. Such low completion rates have important implications for student parents' lifetime employment and earnings, their health and wellbeing, and their children's chances of success.

Access to affordable and high-quality early care and learning for children has been noted as essential to student parents' persistence and completion—with one study finding that it can improve single mothers' graduation rate by [21 percent](#). Despite this, campus child care is in [decline](#) on campuses around the country. Head Start-college partnerships offer an opportunity to combine forces between two major arms of the U.S. educational system, leveraging existing funding streams and institutional resources to better serve student parent families and bringing important benefits to all involved (Figure 2).

Head Start-college partnerships offer an opportunity to combine forces between two major arms of the U.S. educational system, leveraging existing funding streams and resources to better serve student parent families and bringing important benefits to all involved.

Figure 2. Benefits of Collaboration for Higher Education, Head Start, and Families

BENEFITS TO HIGHER EDUCATION	BENEFITS TO HEAD START	BENEFITS TO STUDENT PARENTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family engagement services which support enrolled students and help recruit prospective student parents. • Capacity to support food- & housing-insecure students. • Access to a high-quality early learning program which has its own funding source that can be leveraged to support students. • Improved chances of persistence and completion among student parents. • Access to training and practicum sites for students in a range of programs, like nursing or physical education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 from early childhood, nursing or related departments who can support Head Start staff. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affordable, high-quality, and convenient early learning opportunities for children. • Wraparound, individualized support that promotes their individual goals and their ability to persist and graduate. • Improved chances of attaining a postsecondary credential which can lead to improved self-sufficiency and family economic security. • Access to child development and health resources, assessments, and referrals to other supportive services to help meet their family's basic needs.

Making the Case For Partnership through Data

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, family income, and the extent to which they may be experiencing other challenges such as homelessness, housing insecurity, food insecurity, intimate partner violence, (dis)ability, or mental health issues, is important for evaluating eligibility for Head Start services among the college student parent population.

Improving campus-level data on student parents is also essential to understanding the size of the parenting population at a particular institution, uncovering equity gaps in their educational outcomes, and informing the design of policy and practice—such as partnerships with Head Start—that will have the best chance of setting them up for success.

These data will also be helpful for building a case for partnership with a 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.

Improving campus-level data on student parents is also essential to [understanding](#) the size of the parenting population at a particular institution, uncovering equity gaps in their educational outcomes, and informing the design of policy and practice—such as partnerships with Head Start—that will have the best chance of setting them up for success. Such information is critical to understanding changes in enrollment and graduation rates during times of social and economic upheaval, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and to the actions that can help reverse those trends. To date, very few colleges and universities collect data from all their students on whether they care for children or the nature of their child care needs, creating an unfortunate gap in our ability to understand and serve this student population.

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 institutional research and other relevant offices, such as financial aid, student services, 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 income level, their academic outcomes, and other factors that may affect Head Start eligibility and services.

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

Publishing 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 build 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 its services.²

² 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.

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING DATA ON STUDENT PARENTS

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

To the extent possible, collecting information from student parents on the age and number of their children and their family income provides important insight into their eligibility for Head Start services. Institutions can collect this information through:

- enrollment or registration forms or surveys
- program data collection, such as TRIO, tutoring, advising, or veterans services
- early alert systems
- campus climate surveys

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. More information on student parent data collection [can be found here](#) (with examples provided in the appendix).

2. 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.

3. Head Start program data can help illustrate the presence of 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 Existing Partnerships

According to IWPR's 2019 [study](#), roughly 60 U.S. colleges and universities have partnerships with Head Start to serve college students with children. Connecting with institutions that have existing Head Start partnerships can help clarify whether 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:

- Campus child care center directors and staff
- Peer institutions with campus child care centers
- The [National Coalition of Campus Children's Centers](#)
- Your [Head Start regional office](#), which oversee 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 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' educational 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?

UNDERSTANDING HEAD START

Head Start is a federally funded 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 family services and promote children's school readiness. OHS awards Head Start grants on a competitive basis. Local grantees may provide services directly or contract with individual providers in designated service areas.

Family Eligibility for Head Start

Early Head Start serves children under the age of 3 and Head Start serves children ages 3-5. To be eligible, families must live at or below the Federal Poverty Line, or in limited cases, between 100-130 percent. If a child has a disability or is in the foster care system, or the family is homeless or receives public assistance, they qualify regardless of income. There are no work requirements for parents to receive services.

Head Start Family Engagement 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. 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 for social services, such as housing and food assistance, and mental and physical health services.
- Offer assistance to families in times of crisis, such as addiction and homelessness.

Head Start Staff Positions & Their Contributions to Potential Partnerships

- 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.)

Building a Bridge to Local Head Start Stakeholders

Equipped with key information on student parents' needs and insight from other institutions 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 (ECLKC) 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 an Office of Head Start mandate
- 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 collaborate with Head Start

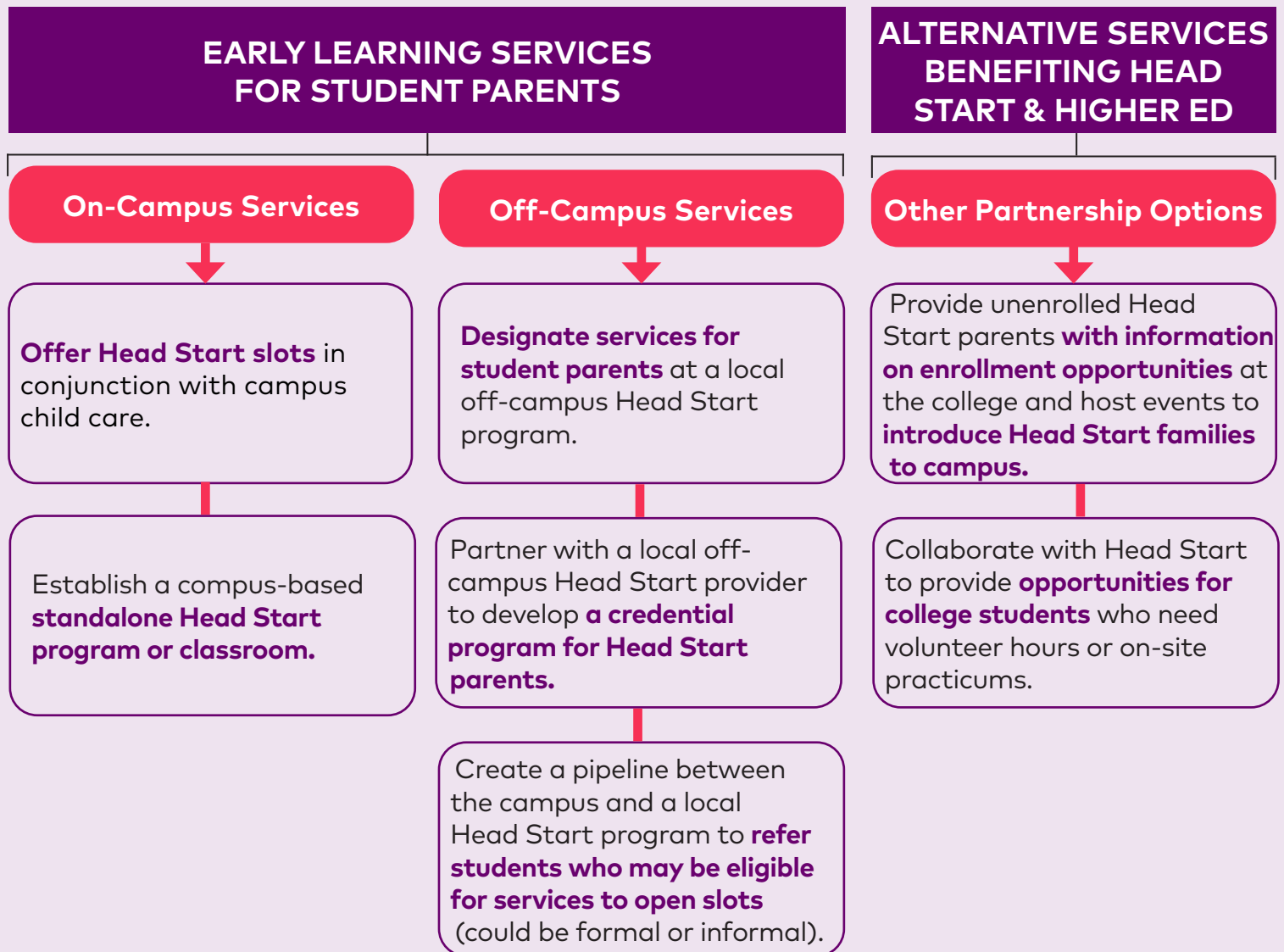
Questions for Head Start Grantees and Programs

- 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 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? Have they considered parents enrolled in higher education as potential source for 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?

Determining the Best Partnership Model

Collaboration between Head Start and higher education can take many 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 set of common program models which these partnerships tend to follow (Figure 3; for more detail and additional partnership examples, see [IWPR’s report](#)).

Figure 3. Examples of Head Start-College Partnership Models



EXAMPLES OF ON- AND OFF-CAMPUS PARTNERSHIPS

COMMUNITY COLLEGES OF SPOKANE, SPOKANE, WA

[Community Colleges of Spokane](#) (CCS) acts as the Head Start/Early Head Start grantee for the county, managing 12 Head Start/Early Head Start centers, including two which are located at [Spokane Community College](#) and [Spokane Falls Community College](#). Both campuses' early learning centers are accredited by the National Accreditation Commission (NAC) and dedicated to serving student parents; student parents receive priority when applying for slots. Together, the centers provide campus-based early care and learning (infant through pre-kindergarten) to over 200 children. Center staff are employees of the colleges.

CCS braids Head Start/Early Head Start funding with state child care subsidies, a Child Care Access Means Parents in School Program (CCAMPIS) grant, private pay, and student activity funds. This braided funding helps meet student demand for full-day care. Both centers operate for roughly 10 hours per day, 5 days a week, year-round.

CHICAGO COMMONS & TRUMAN COLLEGE, CHICAGO, IL

[Truman College](#) of the City Colleges of Chicago system partners with [Chicago Commons](#), a community-based Head Start grantee, to provide the [Pathways for Parents Program](#). The program offers Head Start parents the ability complete coursework toward Early Childhood Education credentials at their children's Head Start center. Truman College faculty teach credit-bearing courses that provide the minimum credentials for employment at an Illinois licensed child care program and a foundation for further educational attainment at Truman College, if desired.

Parents' tuition can be funded through a citywide early childhood education scholarship. Chicago Commons covers child care needed while parents are in class and provides free dinner to families, in addition to opportunities like digital literacy training. The cohort offers predictive schedules, free textbooks, and student learning supports both on site and at the College. Parents receive individualized support from Chicago Commons' family engagement staff to help them overcome challenges such as unstable housing and connect them with resources, such as technology.

Funding for the program comes from the Illinois Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development and the Chicago Early Learning Workforce Scholarship. Supportive services and program costs are covered by a community collaboration grant from University of Illinois at Chicago and in-kind donations from Truman College and Chicago Commons.

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:

- Hours of care (e.g., drop-in, part-time, or full-time care)
- 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
- Need and eligibility for child care assistance

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:

- Need to find new recruitment sources among existing providers
- Interest in applying for duration funding (to provide full-day services)
- Interest among existing Head Start families in earning postsecondary credentials
- Needs for professional education for staff

What the campus can offer and level of buy-in. Campus capacity, as well as buy-in from administrative leadership, are major factors in determining the nature of collaboration with Head Start.

Examples of factors that could affect how partnerships are structured:

- Whether the campus already has a campus child care center and who operates it (the institution or a contractor)
- 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
- Presence of an early childhood education degree program
- Whether campus child care staff are unionized
- Willingness among leadership to devote financial or in-kind resources to the partnership

In addition, there are a range of departments and offices on campus that can benefit from and contribute to a partnership with Head

Start. Involvement from a diverse range of stakeholders is important for ensuring students are aware of and connected to available services, as well as for maximizing the benefits of the partnership for the institution.

For example, workforce development departments can benefit from having a direct link to a source of highly affordable, high-quality early care and learning for their students' children, as many students pursuing vocational programs may have children of their own. Department faculty and staff can make direct referrals to a Head Start-campus partnership that enables students to get access to services and also increases their ability to excel in their programs.

Another example is an institution's admissions office. Especially in light of postsecondary enrollment declines seen in the wake of COVID-19, institutions are eager to recruit prospective college students. Head Start-college partnerships can expose parents who are not yet enrolled to campus life, increase their familiarity with being on a college campus and the opportunities available, and encourage their enrollment.

Potential departments and other stakeholders for these partnerships include (but are not limited to):

- Admissions
- Advising
- Financial aid
- Workforce development programs
- Early childhood education programs

- Health and wellness centers
- TRIO programs
- Veterans centers
- Women's centers
- Academic and student services

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 services and 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.

This research and publication were made possible by generous support from the Kresge Foundation and Seldin/Haring-Smith Foundation.