

ALL IN TOGETHER:

THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY RESOURCE CENTER IN ACHIEVING STUDENT PARENT SUCCESS AT LOS ANGELES VALLEY COLLEGE

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INTRODUCTION

Across the country, community colleges provide significant on-ramps to higher education and opportunities for skill enhancement for low-to-moderate-income families, including student parents, at a fraction of the cost of four-year private institutions. They are often a steppingstone to career advancement and economic security for parents and their children.

This brief provides an analysis of the experiences of student parents enrolled at Los Angeles Valley College, highlighting barriers and obstacles to degree attainment, and an in-depth analysis of how wrap-around services provided by the Family Resource Center improve outcomes. Barriers include family and academic stressors; lack of high quality, reliable child care; and juggling family financial obligations and the cost of tuition, among others.

The brief's overarching goals are to:

- Provide baseline information and data on the experiences of student parents enrolled at Los Angeles Valley College;
- Understand the role the Family Resource Center plays in helping students succeed; and
- Provide recommendations and strategies to strengthen services and fill gaps for student parents.

The pandemic and the most recent economic downturn have had a devastating impact on enrollment at community colleges nationwide—enrolling 15 percent fewer students compared to two years earlier (Bulman and Fairlie 2021). During times of economic shock or uncertainty, enrollment at two-year institutions surges as adults—young and old—seek out new skills or education to give them a competitive edge in the labor market. However, for many student parents, returning to the classroom during the pandemic was not a viable option because school and daycare closures increased their caretaking responsibilities. Financial precarity or uncertainty also challenged families.

The California Community Colleges (CCC) system was not exempt from the impact of the pandemic on student enrollment. The entire system experienced a 15 percent decline in enrollment over the previous year. Black and Latina/o students—who comprise one-third and one-fifth of enrolled student parents in the CCC system, respectively—experienced even sharper declines in enrollment compared to other groups of students (Bulman and Fairlie 2021). As the nation turns to recovery, it will be important to ensure student parents have the supports they need to remain enrolled and obtain their degrees.

Methodology

This study uses survey data collected in the fall of 2021 by the Los Angeles Valley College’s Office of Institutional Effectiveness and the Family Resource Center. 200 parents completed the survey. In addition to its survey, the Family Resource Center conducted in-depth focus groups to better understand the student parent experience at Los Angeles Valley College.¹

Of the students surveyed, 15 percent reported they had utilized services and programs provided by the Family Resource Center. An additional seven percent of student parents surveyed were unsure if they had accessed Family Resource Center services or programs.

A majority of the survey respondents (85 percent) identified as female. More than one-third (36 percent) identified as Hispanic, 27 percent identified as White, 21 percent identified as multiple races, and 6 percent each identified as Black or Asian/Pacific Islander. The demographics of survey respondents are similar to the demographics of the population included in the LAVC administrative data, an indication that the sample is reasonably representative of the whole.

The Family Resource Center at Los Angeles Valley College



The Los Angeles Valley College Family Resource Center has a 20-year history of supporting families, closing equity gaps, increasing economic mobility, and advocating policy change for student parents. It is the first family resource center on a community college campus in California and has grown into an award-winning national model, offering insights for replication.

The Family Resource Center (FRC), built in 2008 entirely from a private donation, is housed on campus at Los Angeles Valley College (LAVC). The FRC team includes the founder/director, program coordinator, social worker, family therapist, and student workers recruited from the program. The social worker and family therapist oversee case management and connect families to social services related to food and housing, mental health, public benefits, domestic violence, tenant rights, and family legal and immigration support.

The FRC provides for **parents** through parenting classes, lactation rooms, virtual support groups, workshops, mentorship, stipends, textbooks and school supplies, community resources and academic counseling; **children** through diapers and children's goods, school and activity supplies, socialization/activity groups, and early intervention services; and **families** through playgroups, social events, family tutoring, a food pantry, and kid-friendly study lounges with play for kids and study areas for students.



In 2018, student parents comprised 22 percent of college students but were the least likely to obtain a degree after six years compared to other groups of students (Institute for Women's Policy Research 2020). Just 8 percent of single mothers who enrolled in college graduated with an associate's or bachelor's degree within six years, compared with 49 percent of female students who are not mothers (Gault, Milli, and Cruse 2018). Mothers of color are disproportionately represented among student parents: 37 percent of Black women, 27 percent of American Indian/Alaska Native Women, and 19 percent of Hispanic women in college are single mothers (Gault, Milli, and Cruse 2018).

Barriers to degree attainment and college completion for student parents include financial insecurity, heavy caretaking burdens, and working full-time to meet family financial obligations, all while juggling class demands. This work is in addition to attending classes.

STUDENT PARENT SNAPSHOT

Annual student enrollment at LAVC is 16,000. Of those enrolled, 13 percent, or 4,000 students, identified as parents or as the primary caregiver of minor children.² The student parent enrollment figures at LAVC are in alignment with the percentage of student parents enrolled overall in colleges and universities in the state of California in the 2018–2019 academic year (Reed et al. 2021, 25).

According to data provided to IWPR, from Summer 2018 through Spring 2021, 2,755 student parents were enrolled. Of all semesters in the study period, Spring 2019 had the most robust enrollment among student parents, nearly 1,600.

40 percent of student parents enrolled at LAVC identified as Latina/o, 29 percent as White, 15 percent as multiracial, and five percent as Black.

More than 80 percent of LAVC student parents identified as mothers, and 60 percent were 25 and 39 years old.

Utilization of the Family Resource Center by Student Parents

Over the three-year period studied, about 10 percent of all student parents enrolled at LAVC, or 233 students total, accessed or used the FRC's menu of programs and supports. Compared to Black or White student parents, Hispanic students were more likely to use FRC's programs and services.

Mothers were more likely than fathers to access the services and programs of the FRC, making up 90 percent of FRC users, a figure higher than the overall student parent population at LAVC. Student parents who utilize the FRC were also younger: Twenty-six percent of student parents under age 25 accessed FRC programs and services compared to just 16 percent of student parents overall.

The data reveal that the services and programs provided by the FRC benefited student parents of color, who are young and identify as mothers, as well as those who often face persistent barriers to their overall economic security, well-being, and degree completion.

IN FOCUS: UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF LAVC STUDENT PARENTS

Balancing Competing and Multiple Demands Impacts the Success of Student Parents

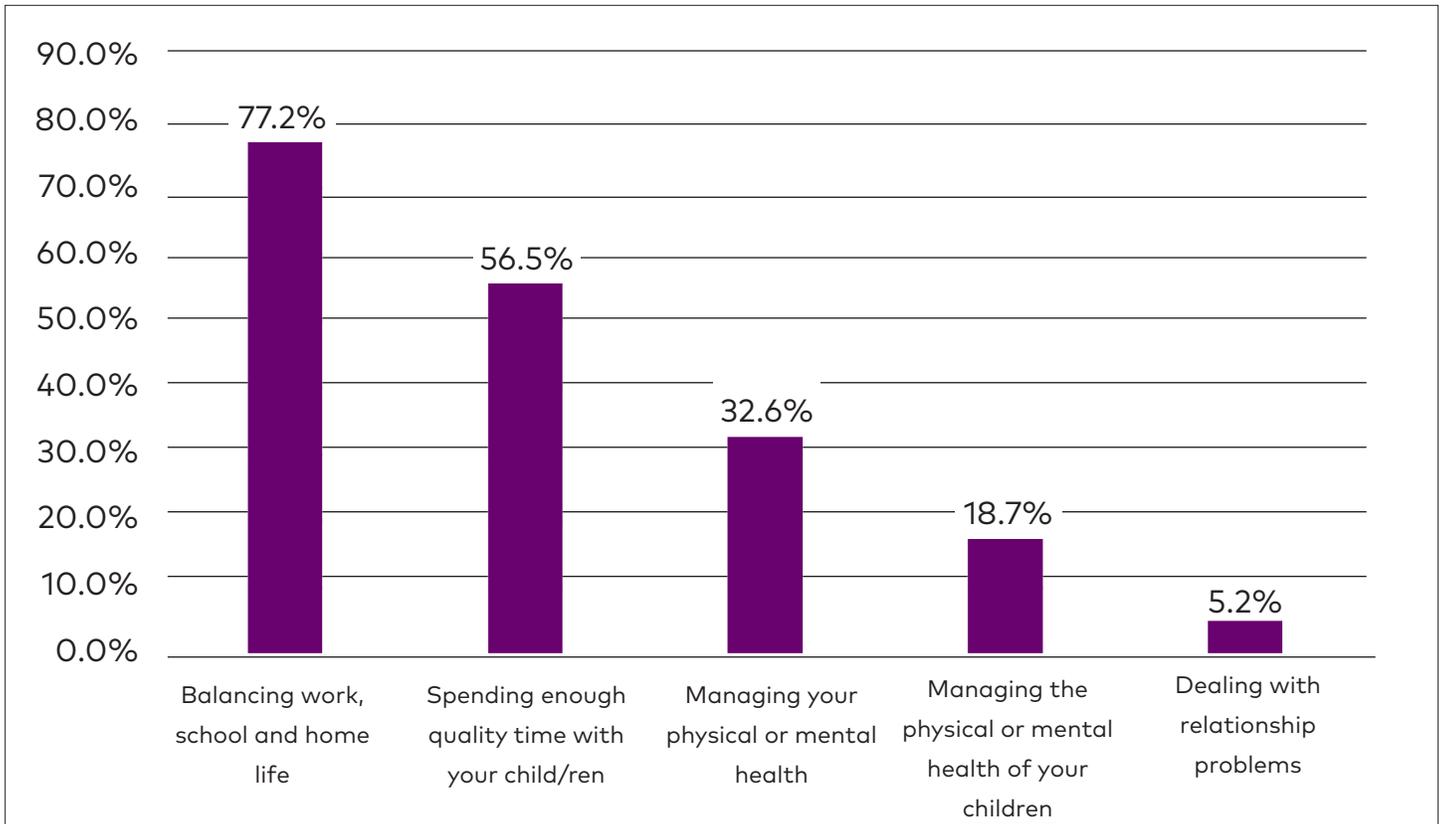
**"I don't get to fully just focus on school. I have to take care of my kids when they get home from school and then put them to bed. Then I try to do my schoolwork and I am exhausted."
—Student parent focus group participant**

Many student parents are juggling work, caretaking and family responsibilities, and their academic careers, often with mixed results. On average, single student parent mothers spend nine hours each day, or 70 hours each week, caring for their children and doing housework (Reichlin Cruse et al. 2018).

IWPR findings show that balancing multiple competing demands is the most common stressor for student parents surveyed. Just over 77 percent of student parents reported that balancing work, school, and home life was a significant stressor (Figure 1).



FIGURE 1. Family Stressors for LAVC Student Parents



Source: IWPR analysis of data from LAVC Survey of Student Parents, January 2022.

The transition to virtual or hybrid learning during the pandemic also had a significant impact on student parents. With school and daycare closures, many parents reported taking on additional caretaking responsibilities, including supporting the virtual learning experience of their children, thus limiting the time they could spend on their own studies or course work.



In focus groups, some student parents reported that virtual learning for both themselves and their children allowed them to balance their competing responsibilities more easily. To address the challenges posed by multiple competing demands, the FRC provided laptops to student parents and helped them enroll in no-cost internet service programs. The FRC also hired a children’s coordinator to provide weekly activities to support the socialization and mental health needs of children.

As institutions of higher education return and readjust from the pandemic, it will be important to institutionalize the practices of hybrid and remote learning for student parents. The ability to attend live classes virtually can help parents balance multiple competing demands more easily.

Reliable, Affordable Child Care Is the Chief Barrier

**"I'm closer to graduating because I had a child in the child care [program]."
—Student parent focus group participant**

For lower-income or single parents, child care can consume one-third of their median annual income (Kruvelis et. al 2017; Malik 2019). Close to one-third of student parents surveyed reported that the cost of child care was a financial burden and a barrier to degree completion. About 31 percent of survey respondents reported paying \$100 or more per week for child care, totaling more than \$5,000

each year. This is one-quarter of the annual income for a family of three living in poverty (Department of Health and Human Services 2021).

For student parents at LAVC, bringing their children to campus to study or attend classes was a strain or a source of discomfort. Those interviewed said they could not focus on their studies while their children were present with them on campus, or they worried they were disrupting other student learners in the campus library. To address this, the FRC created child-friendly study lounges that allow parents to study or receive academic support while interns supervise children in designated play area.

The availability of on-campus child care at LAVC is clearly an asset to student parents and can support persistence. Student parent respondents who could use the on-campus child care center believed it provided peace of mind and allowed them to increase the number of courses taken. However, other respondents expressed concern about the lack of available spots and the operating hours of the campus child care center, noting the hours did not align with their class schedule.

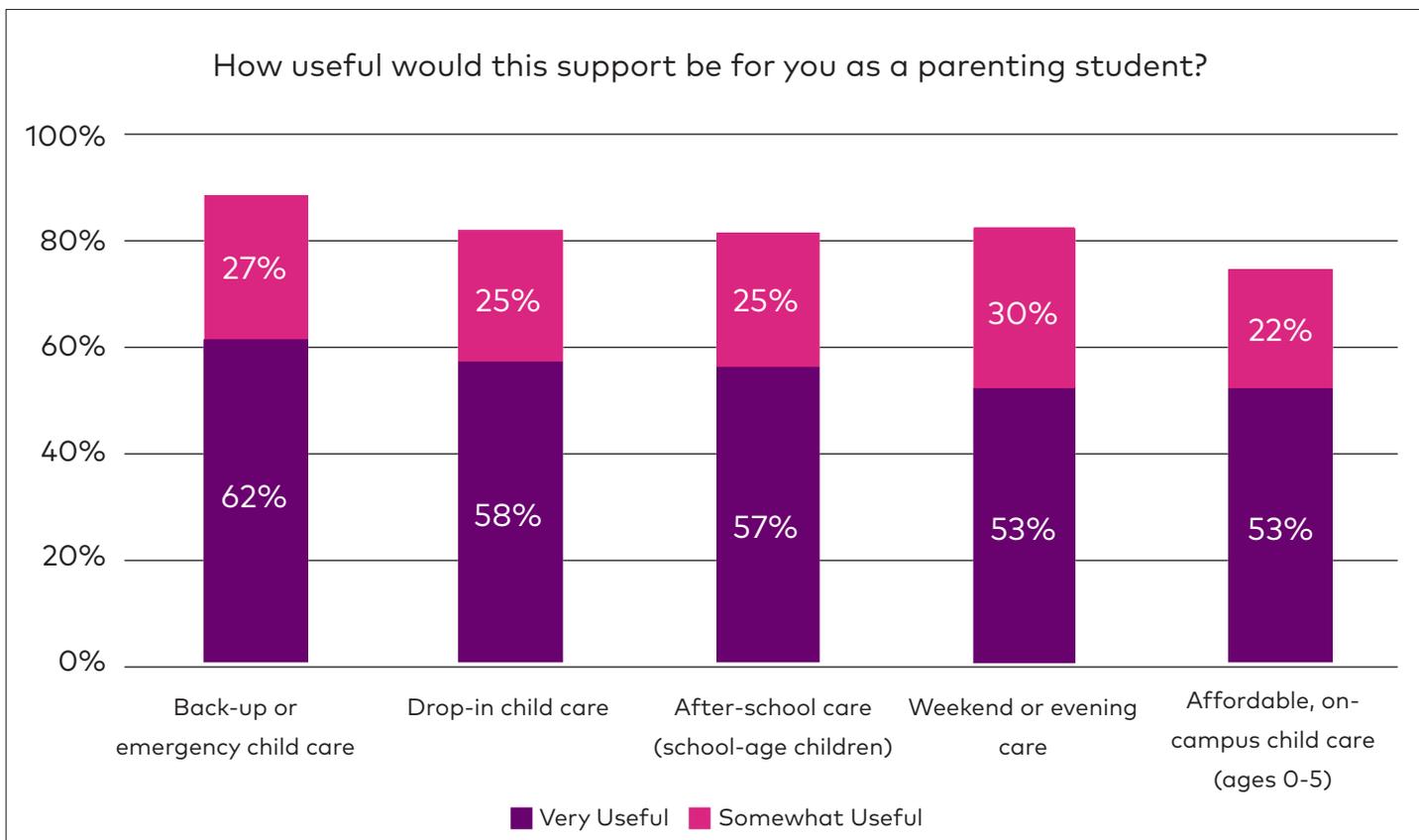


Focus group participants expressed frustration and difficulty securing reliable child care, especially when their plans changed unexpectedly, or a child fell ill, or an emergency occurred. Many focus group participants reported relying on informal or casual arrangements with family or friends for child care. With these arrangements, the sudden unavailability of family or friends can interfere with parents' ability to attend class or complete course work.

During the pandemic, among the 65 percent of survey respondents who paid out-of-pocket for child care arrangements, nearly 40 percent reported losing reliable or consistent child care.

To support their academic success, student parents also expressed the need for a diverse set of child care supports and arrangements: Back-up or emergency child care, drop-in child care, after-school care, weekend or evening care, and on-campus care. Nearly 90 percent of respondents say that back-up or emergency child care would be a useful support, and over 80 percent would use drop-in, after school, or weekend child care if they were provided (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. Requested Child Care Supports by Student Parents



Source: IWPR analysis of data from LAVC Survey of Student Parents, January 2022.

Additionally, through a grant the FRC received through the U.S. Department of Education’s Child Care Access Means Parents in School program (CCAMPIS), the FRC funds an after-school school-age classroom at the on-campus child development center. This provides child care until the evening for 56 school-age children at no cost to parents.

When the LAVC Child Development Center was closed during the pandemic, the FRC redirected CCAMPIS grant funds and secured additional funding to support student parents with community child care.

Social and Mental Health Supports Can Promote Academic Success and Degree Completion

“Mental health supports [are helpful for] just dealing with just the stress of trying to balance it all.”

—Student parent focus group participant

Over the past decade, the rate of depression, anxiety, and serious thoughts of suicide has doubled among college students (Eisenberg et al. 2020). Student parents have additional stressors that may exacerbate feelings of anxiety and depression, or other mental health issues.

Nearly one-third of student parents surveyed expressed difficulty managing their own mental health and well-being, and 18 percent reported difficulty managing their children’s

mental health and well-being. Five percent of survey respondents reported experiencing difficulties in their interpersonal relationships.

In the focus groups, student parents interviewed identified the need for mental health supports such as peer support groups, professional counseling, and parenting classes. They believed these resources would help support their academic success and provide tools to help manage stress. Student parents who reported utilizing the counseling services provided by the FRC found the counselors accessible and flexible. Students who were unaware of the FRC-provided counseling services believed they could benefit from meeting with counselors. In addition to these counseling services, at the start of the pandemic, the FRC implemented a weekly virtual support group called the Student Parent Café to serve as an additional mental health resource to student parents.

Academic Stressors Can Derail Degree Completion for Student Parents

"If I had those [academic services] available to me, I feel like I would do better in school."

—Student parent focus group participant

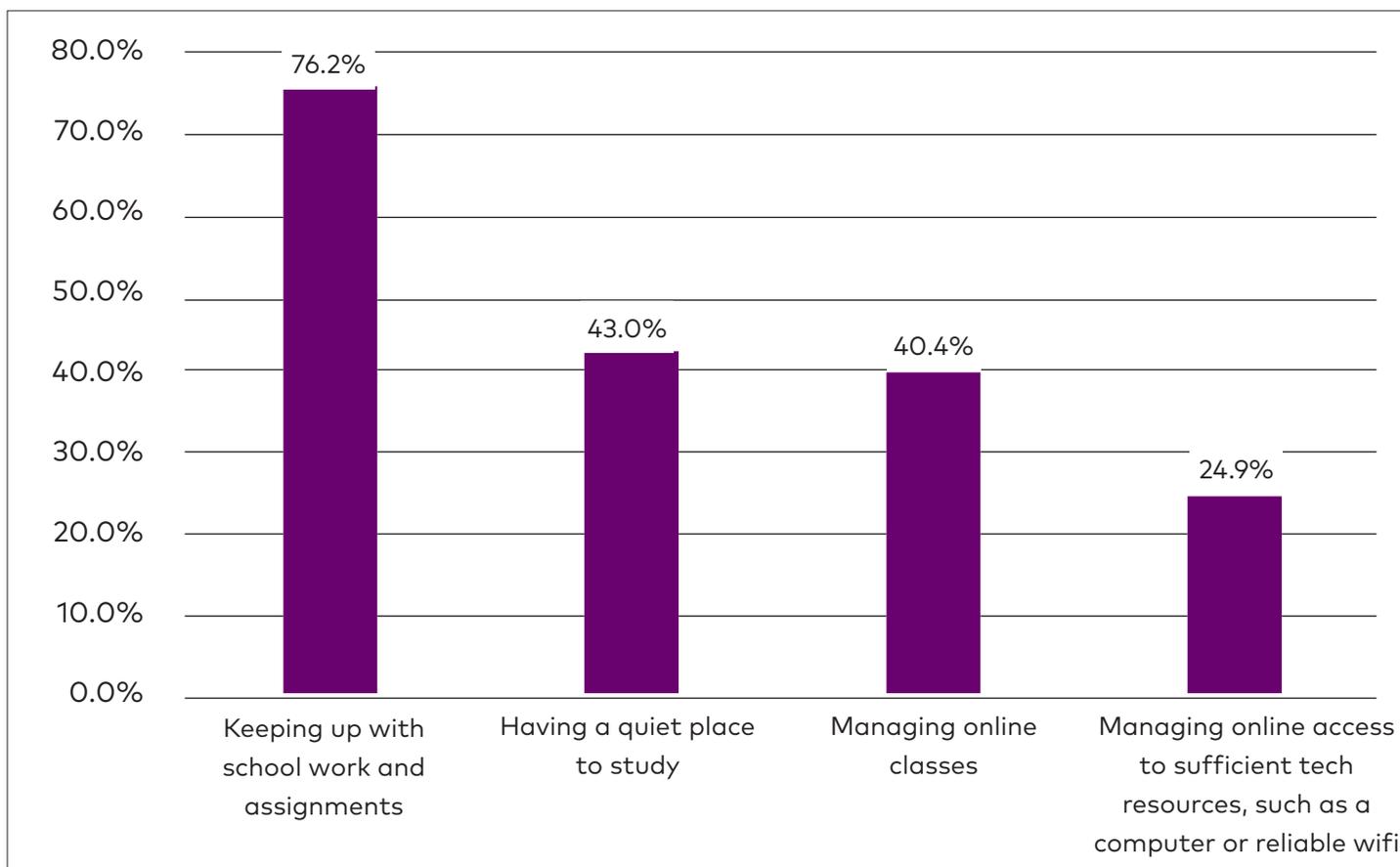
Competing work and family demands can derail academic success and degree completion for student parents (Kruvalis et al 2017). As survey respondents explained, when student parents become overwhelmed with work, family, and caretaking responsibilities, their coursework and academic careers are often put on the backburner. Providing academic support and programs to manage competing demands would go a long way to help student parents succeed.



Focus group participants voiced the need for and importance of academic supports to aid their degree completion. Nearly all participating student parents said they would take advantage of tutoring services if they were available. They also expressed the need for support to transition back to the classroom and campus following the pandemic. Student parents who utilized academic supports—child-friendly study spaces, computer lab, and printing services provided by the FRC—found them helpful.

Over three-quarters (76 percent) of student parents surveyed reported struggling to stay on top of their course work or complete assignments (Figure 3). Nearly half of survey respondents reported challenges finding a quiet place to study (43 percent) and manage online classes (40 percent).

FIGURE 3. Academic Stressors for LAVC Student Parents



Source: IWPR analysis of data from LAVC Survey of Student Parents, January 2022.

To support the mental health needs of student parents, the FRC partners with an off-campus counseling center to provide ongoing mental health counseling to student parents and their families.

MAXIMIZING THE IMPACT OF THE FAMILY RESOURCE CENTER

IWPR's findings show that student parents view the FRC as an invaluable resource. As a result, the FRC is well-positioned to support student parents as they transition back to campus post-pandemic, identify innovative ways to engage parents remotely or by using a hybrid model, and strengthen the programs and services already provided to student parents on the LAVC campus.

More than one-quarter (26 percent) of FRC users earned a degree, including an associate's degree, or completed a career and certificate program, between Summer 2018 and Spring 2021. This is twice the rate of student parents who did not report utilizing the services or programs of the FRC (just under 13 percent; Figure 4).

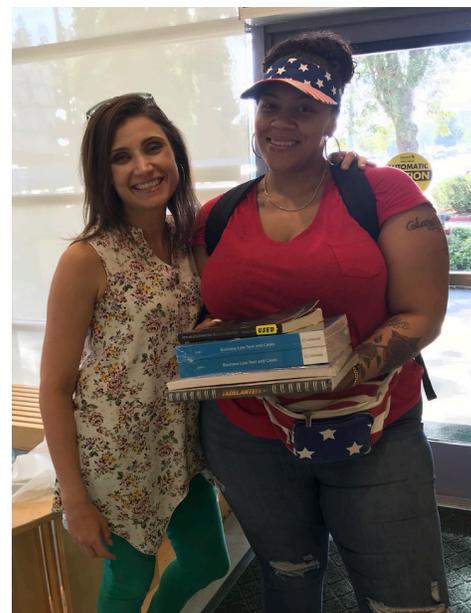
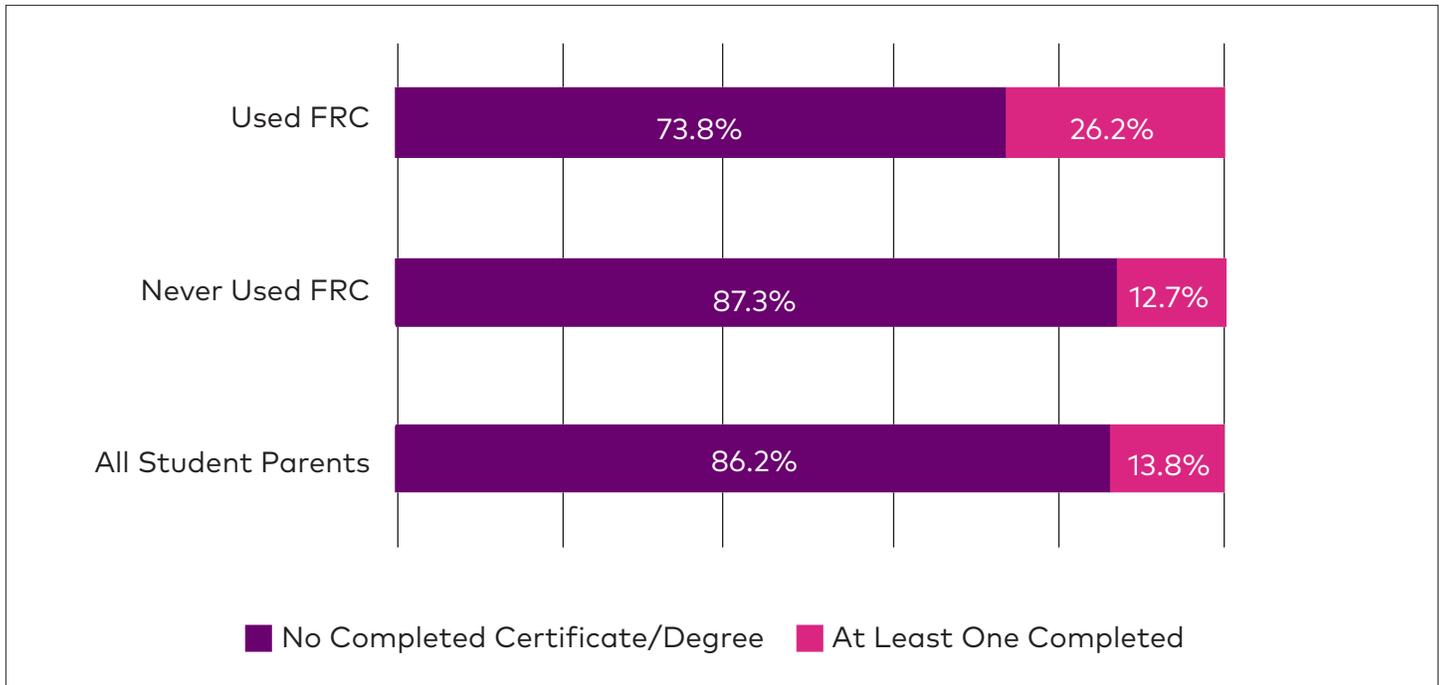


FIGURE 4. Student Parents Receiving a Degree Award of Any Type

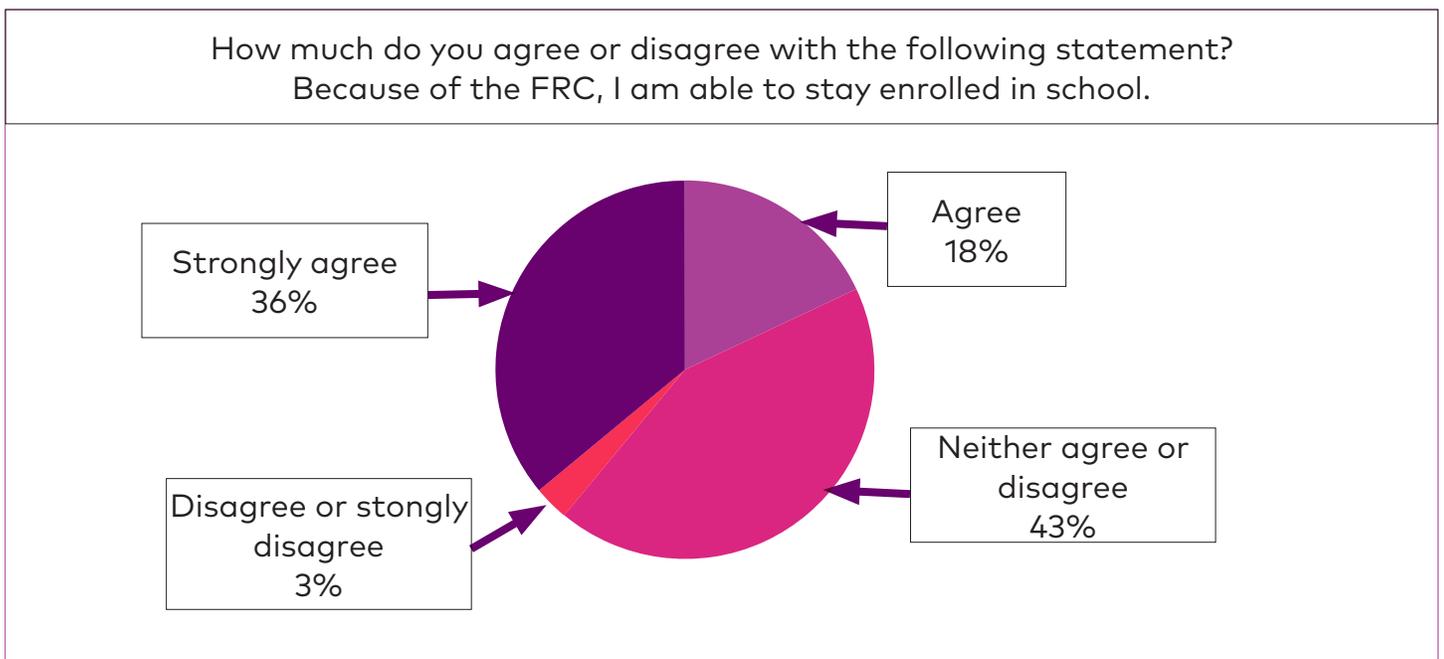
By Family Resource Center (FRC) Utilization



Source: IWPR analysis of data from LAVC Office of Institutional Effectiveness, October 2021.

Over half (54 percent) of survey respondents who used or were unsure if they had used FRC services agreed or strongly agreed that FRC helped them to stay in school, compared with just 3 percent of respondents who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement (Figure 5). Student parents surveyed who utilized the services and programs of the FRC, felt supported, were successful academically, and persisted towards degree completion.

FIGURE 5. Student Parent Persistence Related to Engagement with Family Resource Center



Source: IWPR analysis of data from LAVC Survey of Student Parents, January 2022

Additionally, a larger proportion of student parents who utilized FRC services and programs between Summer 2018 and Spring 2021 reported degree completion compared to student parents who did not use the FRC during the same period.

STRATEGIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS: OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE FUTURE

IWPR's analysis revealed that the greatest challenge for the FRC is low awareness among student parents at LAVC about the services the FRC offers them and their children. Improving the visibility of these services among student parents can help increase persistence and degree attainment for this group of students.

To build awareness of the FRC and its suite of services, the following recommendations and strategies should be employed:

- **Increase student outreach.** Proactive and persistent outreach to student parents is critical to raising awareness about the services of the FRC. Early engagement and identification of student parents through targeted campaigns can capture students as soon as they matriculate to LAVC. The FRC should also engage other campus centers and professors and provide information about the center that can be distributed to new students who may need support. The FRC should consider both targeted and broad-based approaches to engage this demographic.
- **Coordinate with other parent-serving campus and equity groups.** The FRC should coordinate with other parent-serving campus and equity groups to leverage resources and continue to connect and amplify services for parents. Adopting a reciprocal referral system would go far toward ensuring that student parents are aware of the broad range of existing services provided on LAVC's campus.
- **Establish a Student Parent Working Group:** The FRC should work with LAVC administration, academic counselors or advisors, and other campus partners to establish an ongoing student parent working group to help coordinate services, identify gaps and barriers to success, and collect meaningful data to improve outcomes on student parents.
- **Expand funding for student parents at the state and institutional level:** To ensure the continuity of critical services to student parents, additional funding and resources, including California Promise and Guided Pathway Funds, and basic needs funding.

Since its founding, the FRC has proven to be an invaluable asset to student-parents and the LAVC community. Increasing funding, coordinating services, and awareness of the services provided by the FRC can boost graduation rates and support student-parent persistence.

This brief was authored by C. Nicole Mason Ph.D. with research and editorial assistance from Maureen Coffey, Felicity Hector-Bruder, Chaunté White Ph.D., and Lindsey Reichlin-Cruse. The author also appreciates the assistance of IWPR staff who helped prepare and disseminate this publication. This brief was made possible with the support of ECMC Foundation.

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Images provided by the Family Resource Center, 2022.

¹ Focus groups consisted of four different student parent groups: (1) Family Resource Center users; (2) users of the on-campus Child Development Center (CDC); (3) parents who use both the CDC and FRC; and (4) parents who use neither.

² As reported on student financial aid applications. In addition to a student's dependency status, the application records whether the students has any dependents of their own (Gault, Holtzman, and Reichlin Cruse 2020).

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