



SUPPORTING STUDENT PARENTS

EDUCATION AND CAREER ADVANCEMENT

Federal Policy Solutions to Advance Gender Equity | February 2025

OVERVIEW

About **one in five** (18 percent) undergraduate students are parents. Despite the fact that student parents represent a sizable portion of the undergraduate student population, most four-year colleges continue to cater to “traditional” students who are 18–24 years old, are not employed full-time, and do not have dependent children. Meanwhile, the colleges that do place greater focus on older students, like community colleges, are generally under-resourced.

Nevertheless, college student populations are becoming increasingly “nontraditional,” meaning they are older than 24, employed full-time, and have dependent children. More than one-third are over 25, according to **Spark Collaborative**, and about half are first-generation college students. Student parents and other nontraditional college students face unique challenges to academic success and degree attainment, including financial barriers, managing work, school, and family responsibilities, and a lack of tailored institutional support services.

74%

of parenting students are mothers, and three in five are single mothers.

83%

of student parents are also trying to support their families financially while they attend college.



WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

- **Nontraditional students are becoming an increasingly large portion of the undergraduate student population.** These students **often struggle** to stay enrolled and attain college degrees due to the various structural barriers they face. Many nontraditional students are parents and thus must juggle their caregiving roles with their roles as workers and students, according to a **study** from Trellis Strategies.
- **Currently, about one in five (18 percent) undergraduate students are parents.** Spark Collaborative **reports** that nearly three-quarters of parenting students (74 percent) are mothers, and three in five are single mothers.
- **Also according to Spark Collaborative, the largest share of student parents (51 percent) attend community colleges,** compared with 20 percent who attend private for-profit institutions, 15 percent who attend public four-year institutions, and 13 percent who are enrolled in private nonprofit institutions.
- **Many nontraditional students prioritize providing financial support for their families in addition to studying and care responsibilities.** According to **research** by Trellis Strategies, 83 percent of student parents are also trying to support their families financially while they attend college.
- **Student parents report significant financial insecurities.** In a **study** by Trellis Strategies, two-thirds of student parents report that they would be unable to afford an unexpected \$500 expense, and 80 percent say that they have run out of money at least once. The majority of student parents surveyed state that they are worried about their ability to pay their monthly expenses and their tuition.
- **Intersectional identities such as race and gender often exacerbate these barriers.** For instance, IWPR **analysis** of 2020 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) data showed that almost three-fourths (73 percent) of Black single mother students could not come up with \$2,000 in the next month. These financial challenges are at least partially the result of wealth and income gaps stemming from historic and systemic racism and gender-based discrimination, resulting in lower income and wealth for women, especially Black women.

WHY IT MATTERS

Research shows that many factors impact postsecondary degree attainment and persistence in their academic journeys among student parents, including the limited availability of high-quality, affordable child care, the cost of tuition and other related expenses, and competing work demands.

While the cost of college can be a challenge for all students, there is evidence that it is particularly burdensome for **student parents**. One **model** developed by California Competes estimated that student parents in California pay \$7,592 more than their non-parenting peers annually once child care and food expenses are included. As a result, student parents borrow more for college than other students: In 2015–2016, for example, IWPR **research** finds that the median debt among student parents was 2.5 times higher than debt among students without children. **Evidence** suggests single mothers borrow at higher rates than other student parents and that Black student parents hold more student debt than parents (and nonparents) of other racial/ethnic backgrounds. Student parents also have more **difficulty** paying off their educational loans than students without children.

Data on student parents and other non-traditional students are limited, siloed, or nonexistent. There are limited national-level mechanisms for collecting information on this population and their unique needs and challenges, and the dearth of comprehensive data **contributes** to a lack of visibility for student parents and can lead to institutions and policymakers underestimating their prevalence and ignoring or misunderstanding their needs. Better data collection can help to inform better policy, and data collection at all levels is important to create a complete picture of student parents' experiences. Parenting students and other nontraditional students may also face challenges with

other expenses, as they are often responsible for covering the costs of basic needs, including food, housing, and transportation for themselves and their families. Student parents are more likely to **report** not having sufficient funds for basic needs in the past three months than non-parenting students, and, in many cases, students who are parents may be eligible for social programs designed to support low-income families, particularly those that require recipients to meet work hour obligations to access benefits.

For many parenting students, access to child care may be the most immediate requirement. In addition to pervasive nationwide child care shortages, student parents face specific accessibility and financial obstacles to obtaining child care in academic settings. The **Education Trust** finds that fewer than half of US post-secondary colleges and universities offer on-campus child care, and even where on-campus programs exist, student parents often face limited availability and long waitlists, and few on-campus programs offer extended or evening child care hours. In fact, despite increasing numbers of student parents enrolled in institutions of higher education, there is **evidence** that on-campus child care access has decreased since 2003.





POLICY SOLUTIONS

To better support student parents and other nontraditional students, policymakers should seek to better understand and consider their full spectrum of experiences, identities, challenges, and opportunities. It is critical that policymakers understand the value of investing in this growing population of students and that they pursue opportunities to prioritize their needs.

This includes efforts to:

Prioritize legislation to improve data collection on student parents to better understand this population and their needs.

Federal data collection efforts can provide a topline understanding of the national population of parenting students. Currently, the federal government collects data on this group of students through several different tools, including surveys from the National Center for Education Statistics and the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Policymakers should seek mechanisms for expanding the information collected on student parents to gain a better understanding of their specific priorities and needs, as well as better details about their lives, size of their families, financial obligations, and degree completion. Federal policymakers should also examine opportunities to support and improve data collection on student parents and other non-traditional students at the state and institutional level.

Ensure that child care is available and accessible to student parents, particularly on campus.

This includes improved investments in federal programs, such as the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) program, which provides grants to institutions to enable them to provide campus-based child care services for low-income student parents. Increased funding for CCAMPIS could help ensure that student parents have guaranteed child care resources within proximity to their classes. Policymakers should further increase investments in other federal child care support programs for low-income parents, including the Child Care Development Block Grant, and ensure that these programs are accessible to student parents by including education and study as covered activities.



Increase access to basic needs support for postsecondary students, particularly student parents,

both by partnering with states and institutions to facilitate registration for students with existing eligibility under current law and by removing barriers to federal programs. Under current criteria, many student parents are eligible for social benefit programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program (TANF), and the Housing Choice Voucher Program (Section 8). For these students, policymakers should look at

options to promote on-campus awareness about these programs and for ways to make it easier for students to apply, including simplifying application processes, establishing liaison offices on campuses to help students apply, and broadly sharing information about programs and eligibility in postsecondary educational settings. Policymakers should further work to ensure that low-income parents can pursue postsecondary education while receiving basic needs support, including by removing or amending work requirements to make clear that a broad spectrum of educational activities count toward the requirement.

KEY LEGISLATION

CCAMPIS Reauthorization Act: Legislation to reauthorize the CCAMPIS program through 2030 at \$500 million per year; this bill would also increase annual grant levels and eliminate barriers for students to access benefits.

Understanding Student Parents Outcomes Act: Legislation to add students' parenting status to the federal Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). The legislation would also require the US Department of Education to support states and higher education institutions to improve data reporting and tracking on student parent status.