

Briefing Paper



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College Students with Children are Common and Face Many Challenges in Completing Higher Education

Summary

Nearly 25 percent of college students in the U.S., or four million students, have dependent children. Among low-income and first-generation college students, more than a third are parents, and students of color are especially likely to be balancing parenting and college, with 37% of African American, 33% of Native American, and 25 percent of Latino students raising children. Being a parent substantially increases the likelihood of leaving college with no degree, with 53% of parents vs. 31% of nonparents having left with no degree after six years. Among low-income college students with children, parents are 25% less likely to obtain a degree than low-income adults without children. Student parents operate under often crushing time demands, with more than 40% working full time or more, and over half spending 30 hours per week on care-giving activities. Even in the face of these pressures, students with children, like other students who are older than average, have higher GPA's than non-parents.¹

Despite the centrality of parenthood to the college experiences of 1/3 of low-income adults, too few postsecondary institutions directly address their needs or experiences as student-parents, or even know how many parents they have on campus. Groundbreaking research by the Institute for Women's Policy Research found that child care access on college campuses has been declining, with only 47 percent of community colleges having a child care center on campus in 2012, a 10 percent drop since 2002².

The role of parenthood in postsecondary outcomes needs greater focus from the higher education reform community. **Unless the care-giving responsibilities of low-income adults are actively acknowledged and addressed, efforts to improve postsecondary access and completion for low-income adults, be they through online learning, improved on-ramps, developmental education, institutional accountability, financial aid, or curriculum reform, are likely to fall short of their full potential for change.** Colleges, universities, and their surrounding communities must take steps to help students succeed in their work as both students and parents.

A small number of program efforts around the country have focused on supporting students with children, including Portland Community College in Oregon, and Norwalk Community College, in Connecticut, provide services and supports for student-parents, and such efforts should be replicated.

Improving educational attainment among low-income parents will have long-term multigenerational benefits in addition to immediate family economic returns. Higher education is paramount for achieving

¹ IWPR analysis of the 2008 National Postsecondary Study Aid Study.

² Miller, Kevin, Barbara Gault and Abby Thorman, 2011. *Improving Child Care Access to Promote Postsecondary Success Among Low-Income Parents*. Washington DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research; IWPR analysis of the Integrated Postsecondary Data System data.

family economic security, and parental education yields powerful two-generation benefits, by improving children's economic, educational, and social outcomes.³

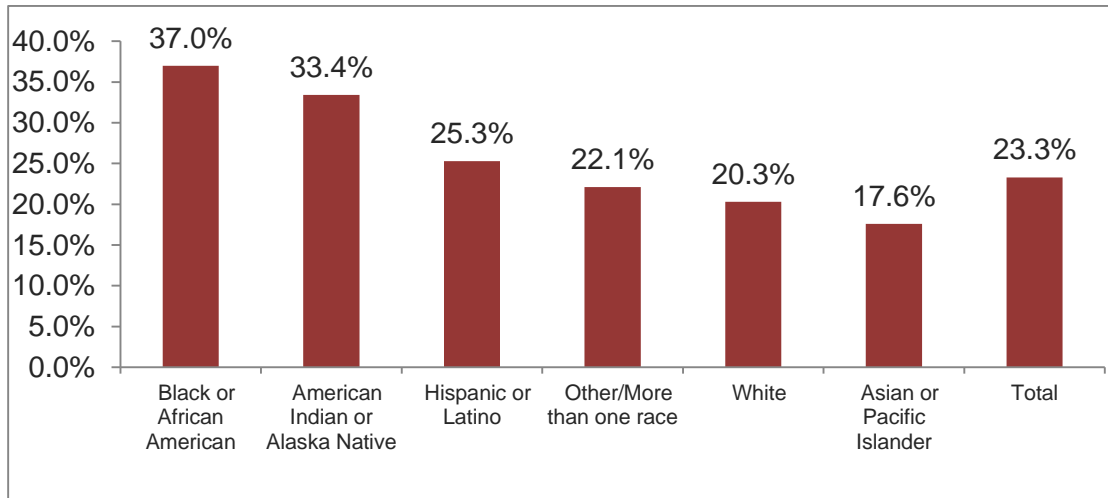
Student Parents are Common and their Success is Crucial to Family Economic Security.

Students with children comprise nearly one-quarter (23 percent) of total college enrollees in 2008, or 3.9 million students (IWPR 2013c). Educational achievement for students with children benefits the students themselves, and the families they are raising. Research demonstrates that increasing parents' educational attainment yields positive short and long-term gains for children, in the form of higher earnings, greater access to resources, more involvement in their child's education and greater likelihood of their child pursuing a higher educational degree (Miller, Gault, and Thorman 2011; Attewell and Lavin 2007).

Underrepresented Students are Disproportionately likely to be Parents.

Nearly two out of every five African American college students, or 37 percent, are parents. American Indians and Hispanic/Latino students are also disproportionately likely to have children, at 33 percent and 25 percent respectively.

Figure 1. Proportion of College Students with Dependent Children by Race and Ethnicity, 2008



Source: IWPR Analysis of 2008 National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey data. National Center of Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education (IWPR 2013c).

³ Attewell, Paul, and David E. Lavin 2007, *Passing the Torch: Does Higher Education for the Disadvantaged Pay Off Across the Generations?* New York: Russell Sage Foundation. Magnusen, 2007. "Maternal education and children's academic achievement during middle childhood." *Developmental Psychology* 46(2): 1497-1512.

Nearly Half of Students with Children are First Generation College Students

College students with children are also likely to be first generation college students. Forty-nine percent of student parents are first generation college students, while only 29 percent of non-parents are first generation. Half of veteran student parents (51 percent) are first generation college students, as are 55 percent of Latino student parents (IWPR 2013c).

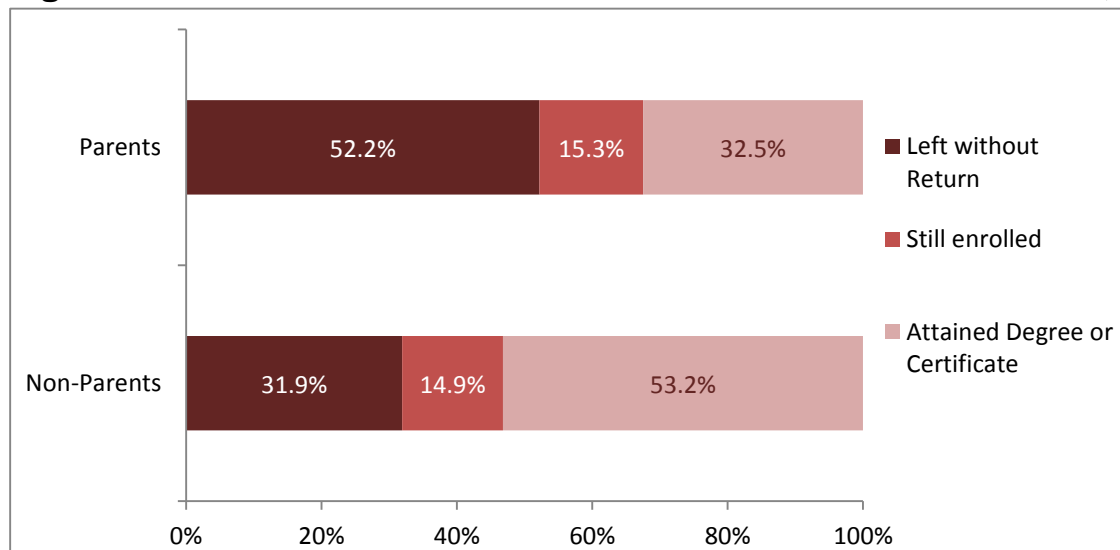
Over 75 Percent of Single Student Parents are Low-Income

Thirty-three percent of low-income college students have children. , and 78 percent of single student parents are considered low-income (IWPR 2013c).

Student Parents Have Higher Unmet Financial Need, Despite Higher Rates of Aid and Loans than Non-Parents

Student parents, and especially single parents, have far lower expected family contributions (EFCs) than their peers. Among single student parents, 62 percent have an Expected Family Contribution of zero, compared to 20 percent of non-parents, and 18 percent of married parents. Despite the fact that student parents are more likely to receive federal tuition assistance in the form of Pell Grants than non-parents, (43 percent and 23 percent respectively) the average unmet financial need of student parents after all aid is still high. Single student parents have an average annual unmet need of \$6,117 compared to \$3,650 for non-parent students, and \$3,289 for married parentsⁱ.

Figure 2. Persistence and Attainment 6 Years after Enrollment, 2009



Source: IWPR analysis of the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (04/09).

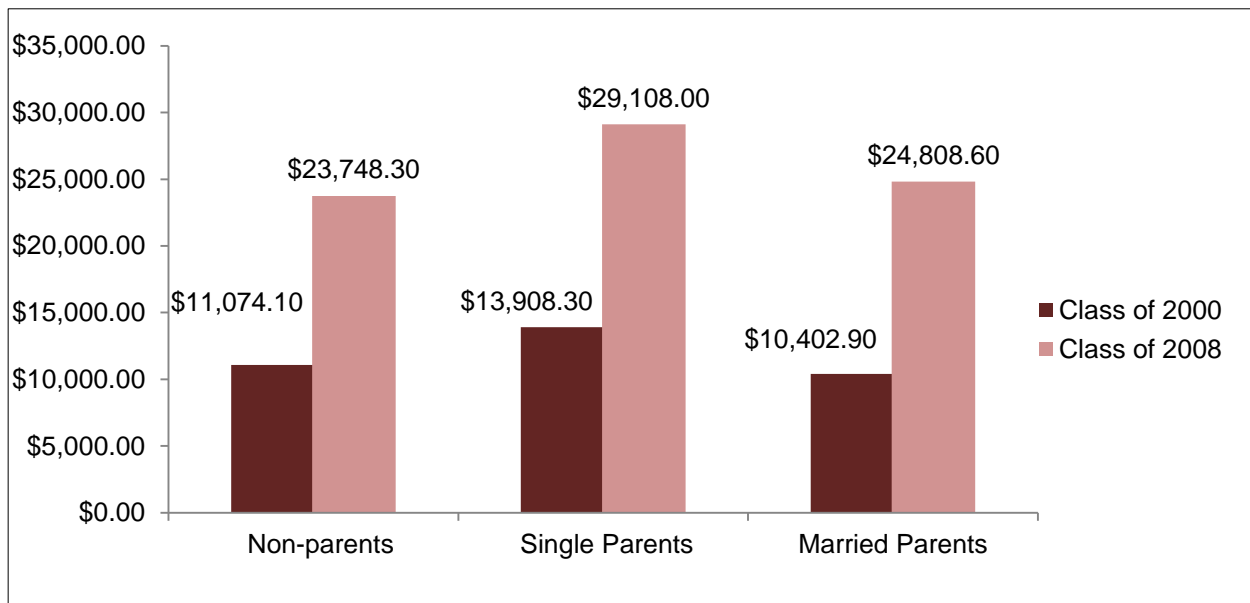
Student parents who leave school are more likely than non-parents to state that a lack of finances contributes to their decision to withdraw (55 percent compared to 49 percent) (IWPR 2009). Student parents are more likely than non student parents to leave school without a degree. After six years of enrollment, 52 percent of parents left without a degree, compared to 32 percent of non-parents.

Among student parents who leave with no degree, 40 percent hold educational debt, and the average debt for these students is \$8,138 (IWPR 2013b).

Student Parents Leave Education with More Debt

For students graduating in 2008, the average cumulative debt one year after graduation for single student parents was approximately \$5,000 more than the average debt for non-parents and over \$3,000 more than the average debt for a married parent (see Figure 3.).

Figure 3. Average Cumulative Undergraduate Debt One Year after Graduation



Source: IWPR calculations, 2000 and 2008 Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study. National Center of Education Statistics.

Student Parents are More Likely to Enroll in Costlier For-Profit Institutions, which Contribute to Higher Debt Burdens

Eighteen percent of all student parents in the United States are enrolled in for-profit institutions, compared to only 6 percent of non-parents. Student parents make up nearly half (48 percent) of enrollment at for-profit institutions. Average debt one year after graduation is \$34,975 for

student parents who have graduated from a 4-year for-profit institution, \$7,597 greater than the debt of those graduated from not-for profit 4-year institutions, and \$12,518 greater than the debt of graduates of 4-year public institutions (IWPR 2013b). In addition to the increased debt burden associated with for-profit institutions, these schools are also the least likely to offer on-campus child care.

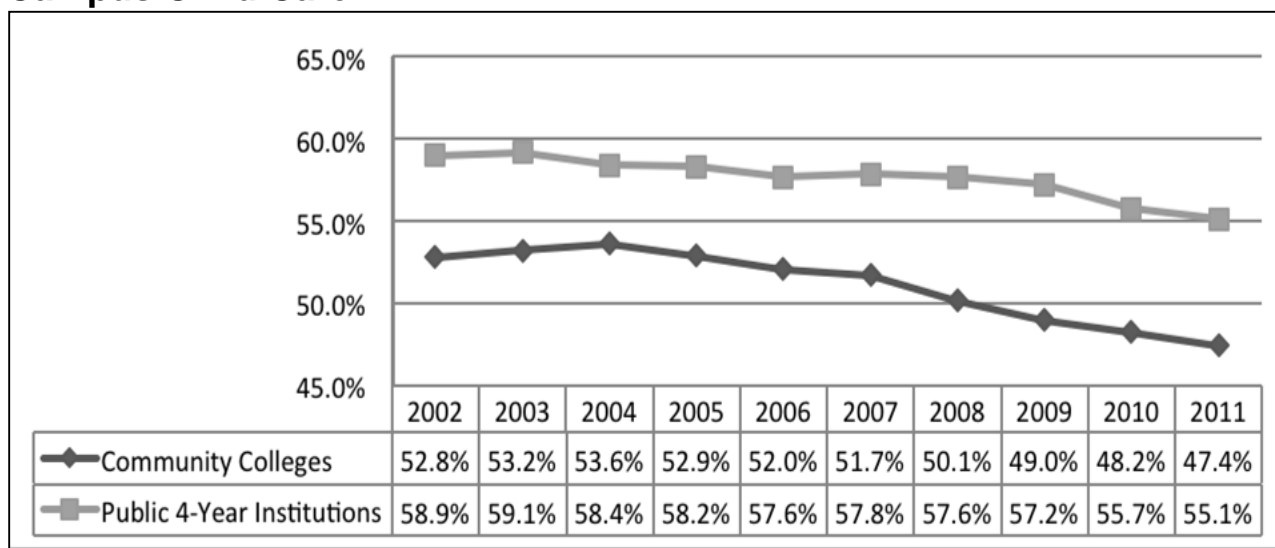
Student Parents Have Greater Work and Child Care Demands than Non-Parents

Student parents work more than non-parents to meet their many financial obligations. Student parents work 29.2 hours, on average, compared with 21.6 hours among non-parents. In addition to their work demands, 68 percent of married student parents, and 56 percent of single student parents spend 30 hours or more on child care (Miller, Gault, and Thorman 2011). These demanding schedules underscore the importance of child care availability for student parents.

On-Campus Child Care Options are Decreasing

Student parents attend community colleges more than any other type of institution (50 percent), and make up 29 percent of all students at community colleges. Yet on-campus child care facilities are becoming less prevalent, and community colleges have fewer child care facilities than do four-year institutions. In 2011, 55 percent of public four-year institutions reported having a campus-based children’s center while 47 percent of community colleges reported having on-site children’s centers (see Figure 4.).

Figure 4. Proportion of Public Postsecondary Institutions with On-Campus Child Care



Source: IWPR 2013 Analysis of National Survey of Student Engagement Annual Results 2012

Even for those campuses that do have child care facilities, they do not meet the parents’ child care needs. Based on a survey of over 80 agencies, 80 percent of centers maintain waiting lists,

and the average waiting list was 90 children, or about 85 percent the size of the enrollment of a center (Miller, Gault, and Thorman 2011).

Gender Gaps in STEM Fields Limit Economic Opportunities for Single Student Mothers

Women make up a large proportion of students at postsecondary schools, earning 62 percent of all the associate's degrees in 2008-2009. Despite high enrollment rates, these fields of study are still highly segregated by sex. Out of 35 fields of study, only fourteen have a proportion of women that is equal to or greater than their total enrollment at community colleges (Moughari, Gunn-Wright, and Gault 2012). Over 80 percent of graduates from family and consumer sciences, social sciences, legal studies, education and health-related fields are women. Conversely, 80 percent of graduates in construction, mechanics, transportation and engineering-related technology fields are men. Gender differences in fields of study are important because traditionally male occupations pay higher wages. Creating true economic opportunity through higher education requires promoting and preparing women, especially single mothers, for careers in STEM and traditionally male-dominated fields.

Policies and Programs for Student Parents are Imperative

Some colleges have recognized the needs of student parents by providing them with additional resources, like campus child care centers, benefits access services, housing opportunities, referral programs and scholarships. These promising efforts should be replicated and expanded, and federal funding for programs such as the U.S. Department of Education's Child Care Means Parents In School Program, and the Pregnancy Assistance Fund, should be strengthened and expanded. In addition, more states should use the flexibility within Perkins Workforce Development Grants to expand supports for students who are raising children while they seek to expand their credential.

References

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ⁱ Unmet need is defined as the student budget (tuition and non-tuition academic expenses) minus the EFC and all aid. All aid includes need-based and non-need-based at the federal, state and institutional level and includes private grants, but excludes private loans.

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