



Transforming Data into Action

Fostering College Success for Single Mothers
and Parenting Students

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Based in Los Angeles, **ECMC Foundation** is a nationally-focused foundation working to improve higher education for career success among underserved populations through evidence-based innovation. It is one of several affiliates under the ECMC Group enterprise based in Minneapolis, which together work to help students succeed.

In pursuit of system change, the Foundation's grantmaking and investing are concentrated on the three following strategic priorities: removing barriers to postsecondary completion; building the capacity of institutions, systems and organizations; and transforming the postsecondary ecosystem. The Foundation uses a spectrum of funding structures, including strategic grantmaking and program-related investments through Education Innovation Ventures, to invest in both nonprofit and for-profit ventures. Learn more about our approach by visiting ecmcfoundation.org

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Each of the College Success for Single Mothers Task Force Conveners skillfully led this transformational work at their institutions. Their strategic and inclusive leadership sparked the changes their institutions are undertaking to improve the college experience and outcomes for student parents.

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- **Kari Reyburn**, Director of Student Life, Equity, and Engagement and Interim Associate Vice President of Student Service and Engagement, Western Technical College
- **Ardis Eschenberg, Ph.D.**, Chancellor, Windward Community College

Nearly two thousand student parents across the eight colleges participated in surveys and focus groups conducted by their college's College Success for Single Mothers Task Force. They took time from their demanding schedules and never-ending to-do lists to share their experiences, perspectives, and recommendations. Their voices are essential to this work and its success.

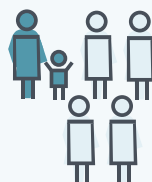
Thank you to ECMC Foundation for granting us the opportunity to lead this project. As the only national funder focused on single mother students, ECMC Foundation's investments since 2016 have laid the groundwork for needed systemic change, building the capacity of institutions to remove barriers to postsecondary completion. We are especially grateful to Jennifer Zeisler, Rosario Torres, and Amber Angel whose vision and support were invaluable to this project's success.

Executive Summary

Single mothers and all parenting students make up an increasing part of the postsecondary student population in the U.S. Addressing their needs is thus an essential part of any equity and completion agenda for colleges.

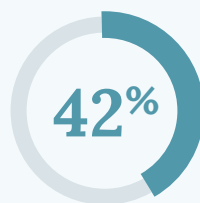
Introduction

More than one in five, or 22 million, undergraduate students are parents (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2018). Most (42%) undergraduate parenting students are enrolled in community colleges (IWPR, 2019). A 2019 survey found that 54% of community college students who are parents were food insecure, and 69% were housing insecure (Goldrick-Rab, 2020). Additionally, almost 15 million households in the U.S. are headed by single mothers, most of whom support their families on very low incomes, without adequate funds for childcare, affordable housing, and health and dental care (Kids Count Data Center, n.d., Women Employed, 2012). The Institute for Women's Policy Research (2017) estimates that there are more than two million single mother college students, representing 11% of undergraduates and that women of color are more likely to be single parent students. Of all single mother students, 89% are low income and 63% are living in poverty (IWPR, 2017). This data underscores the fact that



More than **one in five**, or **22 million**, undergraduate students are parents.

(Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2018)



42% of undergraduate parenting students are enrolled in community colleges.

(Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2019)



11%, or **2 million**, undergraduates are single mother college students,

(Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2017)

explicit support for student parents is essential to addressing gender and racial equity, meeting students' basic needs, and making college more affordable. Education and training have the potential to yield life-changing benefits, financial stability, improved health and well-being, and quality of life for single mothers and their children. With a powerful motivation to improve the lives of their families and set a positive example for their children, many single mothers pursue education and training that will lead to better-paying work and a meaningful career.

College Success for Single Mothers Project

College Success for Single Mothers was a three-year project launched in 2020 with funding from ECMC Foundation. The project is led by World Education's National College Transition Network (NCTN) in partnership with Achieving the Dream (ATD) and PERG Learning.

College Success for Single Mothers builds NCTN's 2019 report, *No Matter What Obstacle Is Thrown My Way*, which found that very few community colleges have systems in place to identify the number of single mothers and parenting students enrolled on their campuses. The report concludes with a set of recommendations to

build institutional capacity to identify and address the needs of parenting students.

The primary goal of College Success for Single Mothers is to increase colleges' capacity to collect data to identify students who are single mothers and use that data to address their needs through the implementation of targeted action plans. While the initial focus of this project was on single mothers, we encouraged participating colleges to collect and analyze data on all parenting students as long as the data could be disaggregated to understand the distinct needs of single mothers. Similarly, participating colleges were encouraged to develop broad-based strategies to support single mothers, with the potential to benefit all parenting students.

With this report, we share the accomplishments of the eight colleges that participated. Each is transforming data to action to better support student parents' success and improve and sustain systems for ongoing data collection and use. We also provide insights into what made colleges successful in their efforts. We hope to contribute to the limited body of research literature and practical guidance for colleges on successful approaches to improving the conditions and outcomes for parenting students.



Building Institutional Knowledge and Capacity with Data at the Center

Data is a key driver in obtaining and allocating resources to invest in interventions that foster parenting students' success. Comprehensive quantitative and qualitative data on student parents can help to tell the story of their strengths, successes, challenges, and lived experiences. Data collection enables colleges to conduct targeted outreach to parenting students about available resources and supports, as well as enabling colleges to assess the results of their outreach efforts. Without that data, parenting students remain invisible and advocacy on their behalf is nearly impossible.

Over the course of the project, participating colleges implemented these strategies:

- Convened a passionate, action-oriented task force to lead College Success for Single Mothers at their institutions
- Engaged in comprehensive data collection to establish a baseline understanding of the numbers and experiences of parenting students on their campuses
- Implemented data-informed action plans to improve the experiences of and supports available to parenting students
- Improved the institutional protocols and systems in place for collecting, updating, and using data on parenting students
- Aligned efforts to support parenting students with other institutional priorities related to student equity and success

Transforming the learnings from the data into action, the colleges are making institution-wide changes with the potential for lasting impact:

- Increasing the visibility of parenting students to increase awareness and support for their needs.
- Improving the available supports and targeting outreach to parenting students to connect them to support.
- Creating spaces and events to welcome students with children and increase their sense of belonging and connection to the campus.
- Creating a community among parenting students to decrease isolation and increase peer support.
- Reviewing policies and procedures with parenting students in mind to reduce barriers and improve the college experience and outcomes.
- Improving systems for collecting, updating and using data to understand and address the needs of parenting students.

Recommendations

Colleges seeking to improve the experiences of single mothers and parenting student on their campuses would do well to emulate the work of these eight colleges:

- Prioritize and improve systems for collecting, reviewing, and using data on parenting students understand and advocate for resources to address their needs
- Align strategies for supporting parenting students with other institutional priorities related to fostering diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging; supporting student success, and meeting basic needs
- Empower and allocate resources to a cross-institutional task force to implement data-driven action plans with support and participation from senior leadership

Project Design

Eight community colleges were selected to participate in College Success for Single Mothers through a competitive application process.

In addition to receiving ongoing coaching, technical assistance, and community of practice convenings to guide the project implementation, each college received an unrestricted stipend of \$10,000.

The colleges were at varying stages of development in their efforts to identify and support parenting students, but they shared a common goal of improving their experiences across their institutions. Each identified leaders to champion the work and align and integrate the project goals with broader institutional priorities for equity and student success.



College Success for Single Mothers Participating Colleges

BROWARD COLLEGE

Fort Lauderdale, Florida

COLUMBUS STATE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Columbus, Ohio

DELAWARE COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Media, Pennsylvania

FREDERICK COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Frederick, Maryland

KINGSBOROUGH COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Brooklyn, New York

LEE COLLEGE

Baytown, Texas

WESTERN TECHNICAL COLLEGE

La Crosse, Wisconsin

UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII WINDWARD COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Kaneohe, Hawaii

The following activities were at the core of the project design:



Cross-Functional Task Force

Each college was required to establish a task force to lead the implementation of all CSSM activities and to appoint a task force convener to guide the work. To leverage essential expertise and leadership across the institution, the application recommended that task force members include representatives from key departments, such as Student Affairs, Academic Affairs, Enrollment Services, Childcare, Institutional Research/Effectiveness, and any existing program geared towards parenting students. We also required that each college's task force include stakeholders and decision-makers, such as vice presidents, with the authority to move the work forward and keep it visible to the president and cabinet.



Collect Comprehensive Quantitative and Qualitative Data

The goal of the data collection phase was to establish a baseline understanding of the numbers and experiences of single mothers and to inform subsequent action planning with answers to these questions:

Who are the single mothers (and student parents) at our college?

To understand the numbers of single mothers and student parents, their racial and ethnic identifications, numbers and ages of children, employment status, and history of college enrollments and stop-outs; in addition, to learn how multiple and intersecting identities based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and systems of inequality impact the experiences of parenting students.

What are the conditions of their daily lives?

To understand their basic daily needs, concerns, and available support related to financial stability, housing, childcare, transportation, sources of income, physical health, and mental wellbeing.

What are their experiences as students?

To gain understand their strengths and challenges; the nature of their engagement and interactions with other students, faculty, and staff; experiences bringing children on campus; and their rates of persistence and completion.

What campus or nearby supports do they need and use?

To understand parenting students' awareness of, need for, and use of available supports on or off campus and the extent to which these are meeting their needs.

Where are the gaps in support? What is needed for their success?

To map existing services and identify gaps, based on student input about their unmet needs, and to identify policies that create burdens or barriers to parenting student success and those that support them.

To answer these questions, each college's task force used The Family Friendly Campus Toolkit (Toolkit), an open-access resource developed by PERG Learning, to collect quantitative and qualitative data.



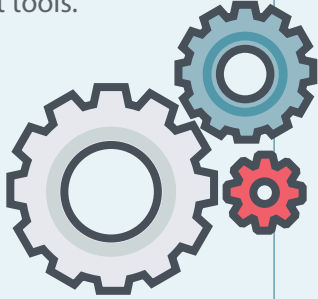
Identify Limitations of Current Data Systems

Disaggregating and analyzing student demographic data to inform program planning and program improvement is a core equity practice. Without the data, progress towards diversity, equity, and inclusion goals will be limited.

A secondary but important goal of the CSSM data collection process was to reveal the limitations of current systems (or perhaps the complete absence of systems) to collect and update reliable information on parenting students enrolled at the institution and establish goals for improvements to the system.

Family Friendly Campus Toolkit

The Toolkit is a comprehensive and customizable set of data collection and needs assessment tools.



Profile of Existing Resources: Identify existing campus and community resources that benefit student parents.

Institutional Data Collection: Guidance on gathering existing (typically unused) sources of data about students with children. These could include the college application, enrollment forms, FAFSA, and Perkins reporting information.

Student Survey: Sample survey questions and guidance to identify parenting students and learn about their circumstances, experiences as students, needs, and strengths.

Focus Groups: Sample questions and guidance to gain a more personal and in-depth understanding of the experiences of student parents.

Examples and Rubric of Recommended Practices: Learn about and assess practices and policies that support student parent progress.

Access the Family Friendly Campus Toolkit at familyfriendlycampus.org



Implement Data-Informed Action Plans

Informed by results of the data collection and analysis activities, each college developed an 18-month action plan outlining broad goals, specific strategies, and measurable benchmarks to:

- make the campus more family-friendly in response to the concerns of parenting students that were identified through the data collection activities; and
- improve institutional protocols and systems for collecting, updating, and using data on parenting students.

To avoid what can be called “initiative fatigue” — when educators feel pulled in multiple competing directions by a variety of grants and initiatives — we asked task forces to align their action plans with the college’s broader goals for improving diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging, and student success outcomes. Once drafted, plans were reviewed and endorsed by each college president to ensure support and alignment with ongoing institutional priorities and strategic plans.



Coaching and Community of Practice

To support accountability and momentum, each task force convener was assigned a coach (staff from NCTN, ATD, or PERG Learning) and the two met monthly to discuss the task force’s progress, troubleshoot challenges, and identify resources to support their work. The agenda of coaching meetings was informal, collaborative, action-oriented, and driven by the convener’s questions. The coach shared research, information about best practices, and connections to subject matter experts and other conveners in the cohorts.

Periodic Community of Practice meetings provided a forum to share insights and strategies across the cohort of colleges on topics drawn directly from their task force work. In some cases, subject matter experts and practitioners further along in the work to establish family-friendly campuses were guest presenters.



Findings & Impact

When looking across the colleges' data-informed action plans, their impacts fall into these categories:

- Increasing the **visibility** of student parents
- Improving available **supports** and connecting parents to them
- Creating **spaces and events** to welcome students with children
- Creating **community** for parenting students
- Reviewing **policies** with parenting students in mind; and
- Improving **data systems**

Visibility



FINDING

Parenting students feel invisible.

Because of a lack of identifying data, targeted resources, institutional advocates, and overall visibility in campus materials, parenting students are often described as “invisible,” despite making up a quarter of the community college population. Parenting students also shared in focus groups and surveys that they aren’t involved with faculty, campus events, and other students. They don’t see themselves or their families reflected in the college marketing and outreach.

“We have the data that show that [student parents] are not a small population . . . I think a lot of people, including faculty members, thought it was too small of a group to need help. It turns out that it’s a decent percentage of our student population.”

—Broward College Task Force Member



IMPACT

Increasing the Visibility of Parenting Students

Equipped with data on the number of parenting students, firsthand accounts of their experiences, and feedback from single mothers who feel invisible on campus, task forces continue to share what they've learned with stakeholders across their institutions to increase awareness and support for their work. They have presented at convocations, faculty meetings, institution-wide data summits, to the president and leadership cabinet, and to the college board. Presentations highlight the resilience, determination, and motivation for success that parenting students revealed, in their own words (through surveys, focus groups, and sometimes directly by student speakers/presenters).

Faculty development presentations now include guidance on how to better support parenting students. It starts with simply acknowledging students with children, spreading awareness of basic needs and parenting resources, and posting parent-friendly policies in the syllabus — for instance, addressing child illness or lack of child-care as legitimate reasons for late assignments.

Faculty, staff and administrators at participating institutions now have an elevated awareness of

student parents, and they infuse this awareness in their meetings and conversations. As a result, they take into consideration parent students' needs when it comes to short-term planning for events, student panels, and programming, and in longer-term facilities and space designs. Student parent voices — their strengths, challenges, and experiences — are also more explicitly visible, sought, and valued than previously.

Further, the colleges are elevating the visibility of parenting students through campus communications and media, and the use of photos of parenting students and children more intentionally in marketing materials.

Raising awareness about student parents has also been meaningful to task force members who are themselves working parents and single mothers, were parents during college or graduate school, or were children of parents in college. Discussing the strengths and challenges of student parents with respect and support — and without judgment or stigma — has opened up space for faculty and staff to reflect on the experiences they share in common with students.



Parent and Caregiver Visibility Means...

- Teaching with recognition, inclusivity and intention
- Using *relationship building* methods
- Providing *specialized* supports, personnel, and resources
- Normalizing the impact of caregiving responsibilities
- Developing family friendly policies, practices and *SPACES*

Frederick Community College created a presentation for faculty entitled "Teaching Parenting and Caregiving Students." Here they presented results from national and their own data, strengths and barriers of parenting students, recommendations for how faculty can better support parenting students in their teaching, and insights into how this support is part of the colleges' (and individuals') diversity, equity, and inclusion work.

Supports



FINDING

Resources and supports aren't reaching parenting students.

In the process of completing the Profile of Existing Resources (Toolkit), most task forces learned that their campuses and communities do in fact have many resources available in emergency cash aid, academic support, food pantries, transportation assistance, technology support, etc. However, surveys and focus groups revealed that many students with children were unaware of the resources available. Even among those that did know about existing options, many were not logistically able to take advantage of those resources because most parenting students work (many full time) and have family responsibilities, so their schedules often don't allow them to access support that is only offered on campus during traditional business hours.

"I believe single parents were essentially invisible prior to this project. Now you often hear in meetings. 'What about the single parents?' This increased visibility goes all the way up to the president."

– Lee College Task Force Member

Through focus groups, in particular, task forces learned how resilient parenting students are. Despite having limited awareness of existing resources, single mothers continued to enroll and persist in college.

"The task force's takeaway: Our parenting students have a great sense of purpose and meaning in their lives. They are incredibly committed to their academic studies and have a strong desire to succeed."

– Columbus State Community College Task Force Presentation

A major theme in the focus groups was the need for support programs to be well-advertised and easy to access. Many of the single mothers made statements about not having the time to do a lot of research to access supports on campus.

Before this project, if I called in sick because my daughter was sick, I might not mention it out of fear that it might look like I'm not a hard worker. Now I'm honest because my colleague's students might be dealing with the same thing.

– Western Technical College Task Force Member

73%

of single mother students indicate they experience "huge amounts" or "quite a bit" of stress.

They described the source of stress to be:



53%

financial stress



50%

balancing school, life, work



34%

school itself

Source: Aggregate survey responses across the eight colleges. N = 1,810.



IMPACT

Improving Available Supports and Connections to Them

Colleges are improving the visibility of resources available to parenting students on the campus and in the community. Some added parenting resources to their existing basic needs information, while others created resource pages specifically geared towards students with children.

Some colleges, equipped with this compelling data, reorganized existing staff duties or leveraged new funding sources to hire student parent “navigators” to provide direct assistance to students with children. These staff connect students with children to resources in the campus and community and organize parent support groups and family-friendly events.

As colleges improve data systems that identify parenting students, it will also be possible to further create targeted outreach strategies to publicize supports that benefit student parents and their families.

While the scarcity of high-quality, affordable, reliable childcare with flexible scheduling options was underscored in the data, the project timeline of one implementation year didn’t allow for most colleges to take action during the project period. However, some used the newly acquired data to seek new or renewed Child Care Access Means Parents in School Program (CCAMPIS) grants to expand programming and support for parents.



Lee College’s web page dedicated to Students with Children includes information about events such as the college’s annual Parent Expo, which takes place at the start of the school year. The Expo features local organizations and resources for families as well as activities for students and their children.



Kingsborough Community College created a specific support web page for Single Parent Students, outlining resources such as public benefits, child care, financial aid, and other supports available. The site also provides a form to indicate that a student would like to be connected to support staff.



In addition to a web page dedicated to Students with Children, **Western Technical College** puts out a Student Parent Newsletter with information, study tips, and family events.

Spaces and Events



FINDING

Campuses are not designed to welcome families.

Juggling school, parenting, and work is a heavy load. Unfortunately, college campuses are not typically designed to welcome parenting students: most don't have any type of on-campus childcare or specific spaces that welcome or even allow children while parents study, meet with faculty, or attend other academic or personal support services. In fact, surveys across the eight colleges indicated that 78% of single mothers never or rarely bring their children to campus.

Trying to balance the multiple demands on parents' time and energy — needing to negotiate separate childcare, finding time for family

fun outside of schoolwork, pumping breast milk precariously in public restrooms, etc. — compounds the stress and feelings of isolation that they report already experiencing.

"When asked what supports are lacking, 51.6% stated family activities on campus and 40.9% stated a place for student parents to gather on campus."

— Columbus State Action Plan

In focus groups, parenting students expressed the desire to attend campus events geared towards families so that their school and family lives could be more integrated and inclusive.



78% of student parents “never” or “rarely” bring their children to campus.

Source: Aggregate survey responses across the eight colleges. N = 1,810.



IMPACT

Creating Spaces and Events That Welcome Families

To meet these needs, colleges are increasing the number and visibility of family-friendly spaces and events they offer — or they are hosting such events for the first time on their campuses. While some now have fundraising and longer-term plans in place to create new dedicated spaces, colleges were able to find ways to make existing space more welcoming. They have added changing stations and lactation rooms; equipped campus offices with children's books, toys, and crayons; and designated a specific study area as a

child-friendly space where parents can bring their kids. They are hosting more events that include children — and some colleges now include a “family-friendly” seal on marketing materials to signal that these events provide activities to engage young children of students.

"Because of this work, we are more inclined to say, 'Yes, let's do an event for families and kids,' rather than ask, 'What about the risk?'"

— Columbus State Community College Task Force Member

Family-friendly spaces foster a sense of belonging and opportunities for peer connection while promoting visibility and awareness of student parents on campus. Creating family-friendly spaces on campus is one example of an approach that creates awareness of parenting students, fosters a sense of belonging, and can shift the culture of a campus. Providing a space on campus where parents can study and where their children are welcomed can ease the stress they experience. The availability of these spaces helps parenting students feel a greater sense of belonging by seeing their families and others like theirs reflected in campus programming. These actions also help with recruitment of new students who are pregnant or parenting by letting them know ahead of time that they and their families will be welcomed and comfortable on campus.

“Culture shift is needed and takes time. With data and a plan in place, we can start looking at physical spaces and see what it would look like to have children on campus. [We] couldn’t start that conversation without this data and awareness work first.”

– Broward Community College Task Force Member

Windward Community College was able to secure a space for student parents to gather on campus near their childcare center. This quiet space gives students the ability to study on campus while their children are present and occupied with toys and quiet activities.

“It would be great to have a resource center with a student parent child zone where we can get the assistance we need yet not disturb other students while having our kids with us, if need be.”

– Broward Community College Task Force student parent



Community



FINDING

Parenting students want to connect with each other.

"It can be isolating and lonely. You can't have it all, and between a full-time job, friends, and school, something has to give."

– Frederick Community College parenting student

At least 41% of the parents surveyed reported never interacting with other pregnant or parenting students on campus. Despite their busy schedules and lack of time to participate in most typical extracurricular activities, focus group participants overwhelmingly identified the desire to connect with other parenting students.

41% of student parents "never" interact with other pregnant or parenting students.



Source: Aggregate survey responses across the eight colleges. N = 1,810.

"It can be challenging to open up to other students. It's hard being a parent in school, let alone a single one. Other classmates discuss how they will get together and study, but my schedule doesn't always allow that."

– Western Technical College parenting student



IMPACT

Creating Community for Parenting Students

To address their desire for community, many colleges created opportunities for single mothers to meet and connect with each other outside of class time through student parent learning communities and clubs. Some of these groups are facilitated by faculty or staff in student support/student navigator roles, and others are facilitated by student peer leaders. One group is based at the campus childcare center. In addition to offering affirmation and encouragement, student parents share vital information and resources with each other.

WESTERN TECHNICAL COLLEGE

created a Student Parent Learning Community in response to feedback that parenting students wanted to have more opportunities to connect with each other. The community has offered student parent luncheons, and family events, including trick-or-treating, a night out at the Children's Museum, and a study night with childcare prior to finals week.



Policies



FINDING

Policies can enable or inhibit student parent success.

When analyzing survey and focus group responses, task forces observed students' positive experiences due to chance encounters with supportive faculty or staff, rather than proactive institutional efforts to accommodate them.

For example, while some parenting students described experiences with understanding and flexible faculty who allowed them to bring a child to class during school closure, or who gave an extension on an assignment or final when a

parenting issue interfered, others encountered inflexibility and judgment.

Taking action to improve the experience for parenting students in systematic ways has led some of the task forces to review a spectrum of policies that enable and prohibit full implementation of their vision for more family-friendly campuses. The numbers of parenting students that the colleges have identified through this project provide compelling a case for this policy review.



IMPACT

Reviewing Policies with Parenting Students in Mind

Some colleges are reviewing campus policies and procedures related to planning, hiring, programming, and academics. Governance and the process for making policy changes vary for each college. Further, the policy review and recommendations span the entire institution and require approval from different governing bodies (e.g., faculty governance for academic policy). **Columbus State Community College** created a departmental survey to learn how each, within its purview, supports parenting students.

The task forces from **Western Technical College**, **Columbus State Community College**, and **Frederick Community College** have provided recommendations to the administration to enhance the college experience and improve the outcomes for students with children. These include recommending changes to policies that prohibit children on campus, improving compliance with

Title IX protections, revising academic policies regarding course registration and withdrawal to accommodate parenting students' schedules, making support services available evenings and weekends, and embedding standard syllabus language to proactively recognize student parent concerns. Subsequently, the task force will make recommendations and guidance for making the campus more family-friendly.

"The scope of our policy review has expanded to recommendations for policy, procedure, funding, planning, hiring, and programming. We believe this approach will have a broader and deeper impact on institutional change for supporting single mothers and other parenting/caretaking students."

— Frederick Community College Action Plan

Data Systems



FINDING

Institutions lack a systematic approach to identifying parenting students and their needs

An initial undertaking for the task force was to identify existing sources of data on student parents. In this process, they gathered information from various campus offices and databases, attempting to piece together what little data did exist. Throughout the process, task forces confronted the fact that their institutions knew little about student parents on their campuses and did not have reliable, institution-wide systems in place for collecting data about the numbers and needs of parenting students.

Some colleges collect and report enrollment data for subsets of parenting students when required by specific public funding agencies for targeted programs, but few collect this information college-wide. Task forces had to draw on multiple sources to identify parenting students, using disparate methods and definitions of the population, making it challenging to get a complete and consistent picture of the parenting student population.

For example, one source of institutional data that colleges draw on for identifying the numbers of students with dependent children is de-identified

data from the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). However, FAFSA data aren't reliable for establishing an accurate or comprehensive baseline of student parents because only 66% of college students complete a FAFSA and as many as one in seven who are eligible for some form of aid do not complete a FAFSA (Hanson, 2021).

"The first challenge was identifying student parents because it relied partially on information from people who may not always be able or allowed to provide it when requested."

— Windward Community College Task Force Member

Each of the sources of institutional data has its limitations, and no single source can be relied on to provide an accurate count of single mothers/student parents, especially since all rely on students to self-report. Further, parenting status may change over the course of a student's educational journey and new parents will not be captured without ongoing methods for identifying students with children. Therefore, it's important to institutionalize and centralize multiple methods at key junctures.



Defining the Population

As colleges develop and improve data collection systems, they are thoughtfully considering how to broaden the category to include students who have sole or shared responsibility caring for children. This might include legal guardians, foster parents, grandparents, older siblings, stepparents, and others, regardless of caregiving responsibilities.



IMPACT

Improving Data Systems

Colleges are taking steps to address the absence of reliable methods for collecting and using data about the number and needs of parenting students. Each college outlined goals and a set of strategies to develop a sustainable system for collecting, updating, and reviewing data to inform efforts to support single mothers and student parents.

Advocate for Better Data — “Know Our Students To Serve Our Students”

Given the fragmented sources of data and collection methods, the student survey was an important step that yielded large numbers of responses and a surprising percentage — and likely still an undercounting — of students who reported being parents and/or single mothers. Task forces share this data widely and present it to administrators, faculty, trustees, and other stakeholders to advocate on behalf of parenting students and the need to develop a more reliable and sustainable system to identify, understand, and serve them.

“The task force presentation was rich, emotional, and engaged. People connected to their own experiences as parents. It wasn’t othered; it was about people in the room.”

—Columbus State Community College Task Force Member

Expand Sources and Methods of Collecting and Using Data

The unique design and functionality of each college’s information management and student enrollment platforms determine the types of changes they are making to improve data collection. All made substantial and important progress

on establishing a sustainable data system or including student parent data collection in the design in the planning for transitions to new data management systems. The data collected through surveys and imperfect institutional sources has been critical for making the case about the value of improving systems.

“We are working on the proactive data collection prompt and a method for students to self-identify their status without a prompt. Between these two, we should be able to have more accurate data.”

—Delaware County Community College Task Force Member

Some colleges made use of their learning management systems, creating a pop-up question each semester when students first log in to prompt them to update their demographic information. Others did so during the registration process, where students could update their information in that system. Still others collect this and other demographic data during the application process. Many colleges are transitioning to new enterprise-wide software systems. This has led to delays but also opportunities to design the new system to include parenting status as one of the data points collected regularly and automatically.

Implementing system changes requires cooperation and investment across the institution. Given the cross-departmental make-up of the CSSM task force membership, which includes institutional research/effectiveness officers and vice president-level administrators, the task forces are well-positioned to advocate for implementation of their recommendations for improving data systems.



Determine How the Data Will Be Managed

The work on data systems prompted colleges to consider the storage and management of this data in their planning. Once collected, where would the data live and who would be able to access it? For many making use of college-wide databases, it was institutional research or information technology staff who would be responsible for the data. For data collected in Student Information Systems (SIS), would faculty be able to access this data? What about student support staff? How would students' privacy be protected? There is no one right answer to these questions, but they are important to consider when planning for ongoing data collection.

Determine How the Data Will Be Used

With reliable information about the parenting status of their students, colleges can provide targeted services, advocate for funding, evaluate existing services, learn more about their parenting students' experiences, and disaggregate student success outcomes by parenting students to inform planning and improvement. Some participating colleges created data dashboards

posted on public-facing websites that reflect a family-friendly campus. This information can also attract prospective students who are parents when they see themselves reflected in a culture that has made an effort to include them, as few colleges around the country do.

"We've used the data to ask for resources to meet our retention, persistence, graduation, and student success priorities. We have identified a pool of students that we can follow and found that parents do well in classes. But it takes them eleven years to get an associates degree because their pathway includes many stops and starts. The data allows us to be strategic about what we do for student parents, especially single moms."

— Windward Community College Task Force Member



Strategies for Success

In this section we offer a summary of the project features that task force members credit with enabling their progress and success and offer targeted recommendations for other institutions to build upon. Our aim is for this information to be used by other colleges looking to improve conditions on their own campuses.



Data at the Forefront

Task force members from the colleges in this project attributed their success to the focus on data from the start. The project centered around a deep dive into data to really get to know who student parents are and what their needs are, but also to use it to uncover the gaps in the current data collection systems. Colleges used data immediately to raise awareness and access resources for students and their families during the height of the pandemic. Longer-term action plans were strengthened by data that told the story of student parents' positive and negative experiences, and the numbers of parenting students revealed that their concerns were not to be disregarded.

Multiple colleges used the data collected about single mothers and student parents to secure funding for childcare and wraparound services. For example, early in the project, **Broward College** used newly compiled data to leverage

funding increases because of COVID-19 to provide student parents with access to Lyft rides to college and childcare, ensure adequate health care for students and their families, offer financial support for summer childcare to allow for summer college enrollment, and more.

"I'm a full-time nursing student and it's not easy to do school, work, and take care of children; it's nearly impossible. I'm grateful that I received the childcare assistance."

— Broward Community College student parent

Some colleges were able to shift or gather funding in order to hire student parent support staff, which enabled them to implement wraparound programs that provide targeted, proactive services to single mothers, along with financial incentives and a supportive community.

For the first time, some colleges applied for and received CCAMPIS funding from the U.S. Department of Education, providing much-needed childcare assistance to their students. **Broward College** allocated Higher Education Emergency Relief (HERF) funds to discount childcare during the summer, provide free transportation options via a partnership with Lyft, and give access to TeleHealth and TeleMental Health services. While these sources of funding were temporary, they provided opportunities to pilot innovative

approaches to support parenting students that, coupled with deep data, can be used to leverage new funding sources.

There has been a change in our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion strategic plan that is directly related to the task force's work. For the first time, student parents are listed as a group we must measure, assess, and support for academic and work force success.

– Frederick Community College Task Force Member



Align with Student Success and Equity Priorities

Task forces continually tied the work of supporting parenting students to their college's strategic plans around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and student success. In some cases, the college's DEI officer was a core member of the CSSM Task Force.

The data enabled them to make an even stronger case for their recommendations and they have used the findings to further influence these strategic priorities of their institutions. Because of the increased awareness about the needs of parenting students resulting from the task forces' work, some colleges report additional institutional backing for childcare assistance, basic needs supports, and student resource staffing. Other colleges have engaged in extended conversations

around equity and intersectionality within the campus community.

Delaware County Community College is finalizing a new strategic plan for review by the board of trustees and the new college president. Because of their CSSM work, a greater focus has been placed on collecting data on students who are parents. With the construction of a new campus, plans are in place to include the YMCA childcare center to meet the needs of parenting students. Single parents are now one of the groups identified as at-risk in the strategic plan. **Columbus State Community College** is equipped with data on parenting students so now can elevate their needs for childcare in their current capital campaign.



Passionate, Action-Oriented Task Force

Participating colleges empowered passionate, action-oriented, cross-functional task forces to collect and use comprehensive data in new ways. Teams were intentionally created to leverage passion, position, and expertise from across key departments that lead the college's activities. In the application to participate in this project, we recommended team members include staff from Student Affairs, Academic Affairs, Enrollment

Services, Childcare, Institutional Research/Effectiveness and representatives from an existing program geared towards student parents or single mothers.

"I think this has been probably one of the most transformative teams I've been a part of. In so many ways, I have a better understanding of how a student navigates our college."

– Western Tech Task Force Member

We also required task forces to include core team members who are stakeholders and decision-makers, such as vice presidents, chancellors, provosts, and executive directors, with the authority to move the work forward and keep it visible to the president and cabinet. In addition to these recommended roles, over the course of the project, various college task forces expanded to include faculty members, student advisors and navigators, representatives of community-based organizations, and student parents or staff who were at one time student parents.

While task force members agree the cross-institutional composition is extremely effective, they emphasized that the passion and commitment of each member to improve circumstances and success for parenting students is equally important. And, in addition to institutional leaders, faculty and staff who work directly with students must be included. Through the task force, some members have built connections that enable

them to better serve students, because they can refer them directly to staff, by name, in different offices or departments in a way they couldn't previously.

Going forward, most colleges will keep the cross-institutional task force structure in place to lead or advise on ongoing efforts to build and sustain family-friendly campuses. In some cases, the cross-institutional task force model — of leading data-informed action planning is being used as a blueprint for designing efforts to understand and address the needs of other student populations, such as first-generation and students of color.

“Together we came up with [the action plan]. The task force has held us accountable and given guidance, direction, and structure. It's been in perfect alignment with CARES funding and enables us to bring things together holistically.”

— Lee College Task Force Member



Coaching, Community, and Accountability

Task force conveners were each assigned a coach (staff from NCTN, ATD, or PERG Learning) with whom they met monthly to discuss the task force's progress, troubleshoot challenges, and identify resources to support the work. The agenda of coaching meetings was informal, collaborative, action-oriented, and driven by the convener's questions. The coach shared research and information about best practices, as well as connecting conveners to subject matter experts and other conveners in the cohorts.

“We had support at all levels of the work. Meeting monthly with the coach kept me and the task force accountable. We learned how to shape a team and where that team needs support to be effective.”

— Western Tech Task Force Member

In addition to individual coaching meetings, the eight task force conveners shared their progress, questions, and challenges with each other in quarterly peer learning and sharing meetings on topics drawn directly from their work. In some cases, subject matter experts and practitioners further along in the work to establish family-friendly campuses were guest presenters.

TRANSFORMING DATA TO ACTION:

Recommendations

for Colleges

Use the Family Friendly Campus Toolkit to collect data and identify resources and practices that fit the needs of your college.

Prioritize qualitative and quantitative data from the start, with a focus on learning more about the population you aim to serve and uncovering gaps in data collection systems.

Use data to advocate for resources and to improve outreach to parenting students.

Improve systematic data collection and expand sources and methods for collecting, updating, and using parenting student data.

Find connection points and strategic alignment with institutional priorities related to student success; diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging; basic needs; and college affordability.

Create a cross-institutional and cross-functional task force of institutional leaders, faculty, staff, and students to leverage diverse expertise, positionality, and passion for supporting parenting students.

Designate an inclusive and collaborative leader to engage task force members' participation in meaningful ways.

Ensure that institutional leaders at the cabinet level are key task force members, who can regularly share the task force activities with the president and senior leadership.

Empower your task force to create and implement an action plan with institutional support.

Build coaching into project designs to support momentum, accountability, problem-solving, and thought partnership.

Form connections with other institutions doing similar work to share information and strategies and celebrate wins together.

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