



# BUSY WITH PURPOSE

Lessons for Education and  
Policy Leaders from Returning  
Student Parents

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**INSTITUTE  
FOR WOMEN'S  
POLICY  
RESEARCH**

A JUST FUTURE BEGINS WITH BOLD IDEAS.



## ABOUT THIS REPORT

Postsecondary attainment is widely recognized as key to accessing living-wage careers—in addition to fulfilling workforce demands and elevating the United States' standing on the world stage. While much of the work to increase attainment rates has recognized the role of reengaging adults who have some college credit, but no degree or certificate, less attention has been paid to the salience of parenthood in adults' postsecondary experiences. This report draws from Institute for Women's Policy Research analysis of national postsecondary data describing first-time enrolled students with children who left college before completing a degree or certificate and a series of 11 interviews with student parents who have taken prolonged breaks from postsecondary enrollment. The report describes common challenges to persistence and college reentry faced by adult students with children, factors that allow them to go back to school, and, in student parents' own words, tangible actions that policy and education leaders should take to better support their success. This report was developed with support from Imaginable Futures.

## ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR WOMEN'S POLICY RESEARCH

We win economic equity for all women and eliminate barriers to their full participation in society. As a leading national think tank, we build evidence to shape policies that grow women's power and influence, close inequality gaps, and improve the economic well-being of families. IWPR is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization that also works in affiliation with the Program on Gender Analysis in Economics at American University.

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# CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	1
INTRODUCTION.....	5
LEAVING COLLEGE WITHOUT A DEGREE: PATTERNS AMONG STUDENT PARENTS.....	6
LEARNING FROM STUDENT PARENTS' LIVED EXPERIENCE.....	8
WHY STUDENT PARENTS LEAVE COLLEGE BEFORE GRADUATING.....	9
THE RETURNING STUDENT PARENT EXPERIENCE.....	19
LESSONS FROM STUDENT PARENTS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION AND POLICY LEADERS.....	30
CONCLUSION.....	35
REFERENCES.....	38

## FIGURES AND TABLES

<b>FIGURE 1.</b> STUDENT PARENTS ARE NEARLY TWICE AS LIKELY TO LEAVE COLLEGE WITHOUT A DEGREE AS STUDENTS WITHOUT CHILDREN.....	7
---	---

<b>APPENDIX TABLE 1.</b> SHARE OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS WHO LEFT COLLEGE WITHOUT A DEGREE OR CERTIFICATE WITHIN SIX YEARS OF ENROLLMENT, BY DEPENDENCY AND PARENT STATUS, 2012-2017.....	36
---	----

<b>APPENDIX TABLE 2.</b> SHARE OF STUDENT PARENTS WHO LEFT COLLEGE WITHOUT A DEGREE OR CERTIFICATE WITHIN SIX YEARS OF ENROLLMENT, BY GENDER, 2012-2017.....	37
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Achieving national postsecondary attainment goals that aim to prepare the U.S. workforce to meet growing labor market demands is contingent on engaging adult learners, especially those who have earned some college credit in the past (Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl 2013; Lane, Michelau, and Palmer 2012; Nettles 2017; Ward et al. 2020). Improving adult attainment rates is also critical to increasing family economic security—particularly in light of the devastating economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. While efforts to understand adult learner experiences in postsecondary education are increasing, little work has been done to examine the role of parenthood in adult students' ability to re-enter higher education and earn college credentials.

Analysis of national postsecondary data shows that over half of undergraduate students with children leave college without completing their educational programs within six years of enrollment, making them nearly twice as likely to leave without a degree as students without children (Institute for Women's Policy Research 2020a). Insight into why these students leave college before completing, their experiences as adult and parenting students, and what supports could help them reengage with college, or avoid stopping out altogether, is vital to increasing their chances of economic mobility and meeting labor market demands.



**Supporting student parents' ability to succeed in higher education increases their families' chances of economic security and social mobility, enhances diversity of thought and experience in the classroom, and empowers contributing, skilled members of the U.S. workforce and society.**

This report summarizes findings from analysis of data from the 2012-2017 Beginning Postsecondary Student (BPS) Longitudinal Survey describing student parents who leave college before completing a degree or certificate within six years of first enrolling, as well as from a series of 11 interviews conducted with student parents who took a break of at least one year from their postsecondary journeys. Guided by student parents' own voices, the report shares insight into their postsecondary experiences, including the decision to leave school before graduating and later reengage to continue their pursuit of college credentials. It also provides student-driven policy recommendations for education and policy leaders. The following executive summary provides an overview of the report's key findings and recommendations.

## LEAVING COLLEGE WITHOUT A DEGREE: PATTERNS AMONG STUDENT PARENTS

- Beginning, first-time enrolled students with children are nearly twice as likely to leave college before graduating than students who are not parents: over half (52 percent) of student parents suspend their enrollment within six years without returning to complete their programs, compared with 29 percent of all students without children and 32 percent of students overall.
- The likelihood of leaving college without a degree or certificate within six years of enrollment is particularly high among community college students (62 percent), single student parents (54 percent), Black student parents (58 percent), and student parents of infants (56 percent).
- Single fathers (71 percent), Black and Latino fathers (72 percent and 66 percent, respectively), and fathers at public four-year institutions (70 percent) experience higher stop-out rates than student parents overall, student mothers, and other student fathers.



## WHY STUDENT PARENTS LEAVE COLLEGE BEFORE GRADUATING

- “Time poverty,” or the lack of adequate time for day-to-day responsibilities, is a common experience. Many student parents balance work, school, and family needs, without access to affordable child care, flexible course and work schedules, or convenient transportation. This balancing act often falls apart when one aspect is out of place, leading many student parents to leave college before completing.
- Student parents’ decisions to leave college are often affected by work—factors such as inflexible schedules and commuting challenges and the need to work significant hours to meet their family’s basic needs were cited as major considerations.
- Reliable, high-quality, and affordable child care that meets students’ scheduling needs is particularly hard for student parents to secure, especially those in need of infant care.
- The financial burden associated with college enrollment has put higher education increasingly out of reach for many student parents. While interviewees described receiving federal financial and emergency aid, scholarships, and public assistance, as well as taking out loans, for many, these sources are often not accessible or not enough. Small institutional debts also cause delays in student parents’ progress towards completion.





- Student parents' educational aspirations are repeatedly set aside to deal with family and life circumstances out of their control. Experiences of homelessness, domestic violence, addiction, child illness and mental health issues, among others, affect their ability to remain enrolled. Many interviewees emphasized the importance of mental health services to help them cope with these events—especially given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

## THE RETURNING STUDENT PARENT EXPERIENCE

- Personal and careers goals, often driven by a desire to provide for their children's futures, are main motivators for student parents to return to college.
- Once back on campus, interviewees expressed appreciation at the benefits that their life experience brought them as returning adult learners, including higher confidence and improved time management skills. Being parents also affects their experience; seeing and interacting with other students like themselves was cited as especially encouraging.
- Student parents feel strongly that college systems and practices are largely not designed with them—parenting and adult students—in mind. The perceived focus on “traditional” students creates a sense of isolation and “otherness,” in addition to leading to logistical and financial burdens. Rigid attendance rules and inflexible service provision options leave many interviewees without needed support.
- A lack of tailored guidance for navigating educational systems was also cited as challenging for returning student parents. Many described feeling unfamiliar with how to navigate college systems and campus life after returning from a prolonged break; this feeling was especially pronounced for student parents attending four-year institutions.
- Student parents experience a range of challenges related to securing needed financial aid, especially parents with college-aged children who have taken out loans to help cover the cost of their children's education. Many shared that emergency assistance, including aid provided by the CARES Act, is invaluable.

**“I’m busy but I’m busy with purpose. There’s a goal in sight.”  
- Waukecha**

- Public assistance programs act as lifelines for many student parent families, however rigid and/or excessive requirements for receiving assistance cause ongoing problems. Some working student parents make too much to qualify, yet still are unable to afford services, such as child care, which are essential to their ability to remain enrolled.
- Online learning and student services were cited as helpful to many student parents, allowing them to access courses and advising in the midst of busy schedules. Despite this, most (though not all) expressed a preference for in-person classes.
- Interviewees whose children were able to secure on-campus child care slots greatly appreciate the quality and convenience of the care their children received. The simple presence of their children on campus with them provides a huge comfort.
- Wraparound support programs, especially those designed specifically for student parents, were gamechangers for many interviewees. The provision of financial and physical resources combined with the intentionality of services designed for student parents provides concrete and emotional support that can improve their ability to persist.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FROM STUDENT PARENTS FOR EDUCATION AND POLICY LEADERS**

- Provide flexible, tailored support for returning student parents, including intentional, proactive guidance for reentry.
- Account for the scheduling and flexibility needs of students who have caregiving and work responsibilities in campus participation and attendance requirements, as well as student services and academic advising.
- Build systems, policies, and physical spaces that acknowledge and embrace student parents and their families.
- Facilitate access to public assistance for student parents with low incomes to improve their ability to become self-sufficient and provide for their families.
- Prioritize the provision of affordable, accessible, and high-quality child care options for student parents needing care.
- Increase access to holistic wraparound support for student parent families.
- Recognize student parents' grit and resilience, and value the life experience, perspective, and dedication that they bring to campus and the classroom.
- Create frameworks of support that are informed by student parent perspectives and input.



## INTRODUCTION

More than one in five college students—or nearly four million undergraduates—are parents (Institute for Women's Policy Research and Ascend at the Aspen Institute 2019). The majority of them have taken or will take a prolonged break from college enrollment before completing their educational programs (Institute for Women's Policy Research 2020a; Institute for Women's Policy Research and Ascend at the Aspen Institute 2019). Ensuring that student parents are able to earn high-quality degrees or certificates is not just crucial for enabling their families to achieve economic security and mobility. It is also essential to accelerating progress toward national and state postsecondary attainment goals, set by the former Obama administration, Lumina Foundation, and 45 individual states, to ensure the U.S. workforce can meet growing labor market demands and remain competitive on the international stage (Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl 2013; Lumina Foundation 2020; The White House, Office of the Press Secretary 2009; Ward et al. 2020).



**Given that over one third (35 percent) of adults with some college credit, but no degree, are parents of children under 18, understanding the role of parenthood in their ability to reenroll and graduate is critical to successful goal achievement.**

At the current rate of progress, the United States is unlikely to meet these goals, which broadly aim for at least 60 percent of the adult population in the U.S. to hold a postsecondary degree or credential by 2025 (Lumina Foundation 2020; Shapiro et al. 2019; Ward et al. 2020). Black, Native American, Alaska Native, and Latinx students, are particularly unlikely to reach 60 percent attainment in that time frame compared with their white or Asian counterparts (Institute for Women's Policy Research 2020b; Nettles 2017).<sup>1</sup>

Growing attention has focused on the importance of adults who have earned some college credit, but have not attained a degree, to achieving degree attainment goals. Yet little work has been done to understand the experience of adults with some college credit who are parents, and how caregiving responsibilities affect their ability to earn a postsecondary education. Estimates show that reaching state and national attainment goals will not be possible without engaging adult learners who started college but did not complete a degree or certificate (Anderson 2017; Carlson and Laderman 2018; Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl 2013; Pingel, Parker, and Sisneros 2016; Ward et al. 2020). Given that over one third (35 percent) of adults with some college credit, but no degree, are parents of children under 18, understanding the role of parenthood in their ability to reenroll and graduate is critical to successful goal achievement (Institute for Women's Policy Research 2020b).

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<sup>1</sup> While estimates suggest attainment among Asian students overall has already exceeded 60 percent, attainment rates among some Asian subgroups, such as Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students, are lower than for Asian students overall (National Center for Education Statistics 2016).

This report begins by sharing a summary of patterns among student parents who leave college without returning to attain a degree or certificate compared with their peers without children. It then shares themes, perspectives, and lessons drawn from a series of interviews with student parents who have taken breaks from postsecondary enrollment and reengaged with their college careers later in life. These interviews provide insight into the experiences of parents throughout their postsecondary journeys, including the reasons they decide to pause those journeys, what factors allow them to reenroll, and the supportive services that have enabled them to persist—or that they have needed, but have not been able to secure.

Finally, the report concludes with recommendations, in the words of student parents themselves, for how postsecondary institutions, education leaders, and policymakers can design an education system that creates pathways for reengagement that are cognizant of and responsive to the unique needs and experiences of students who are parents.

## LEAVING COLLEGE WITHOUT A DEGREE: PATTERNS AMONG STUDENT PARENTS

The journey to college completion for students with children often looks dramatically different than what is traditionally thought of as the “typical” college experience. In fact, most of the nearly four million undergraduate student parents take longer to earn degrees than their peers without children and often do not do so in the first try (Institute for Women’s Policy Research and Ascend at the Aspen Institute 2019; Institute for Women’s Policy Research 2020a).

... most of the nearly four million undergraduate student parents take longer to earn degrees than their peers without children and often do not do so in the first try.



According to analysis of data from the 2012-2017 Beginning Postsecondary Student (BPS) Longitudinal Survey, beginning, first-time enrolled students with children are nearly twice as likely as students who are not parents to leave college before graduating without returning to finish their programs within six years of their initial enrollment.<sup>2</sup> Fifty-two percent of student parents leave without a degree or certificate, compared with 29 percent of all students without children and 47 percent of other independent—or “nontraditional”—students who are not parents (Figure 1).<sup>3</sup>

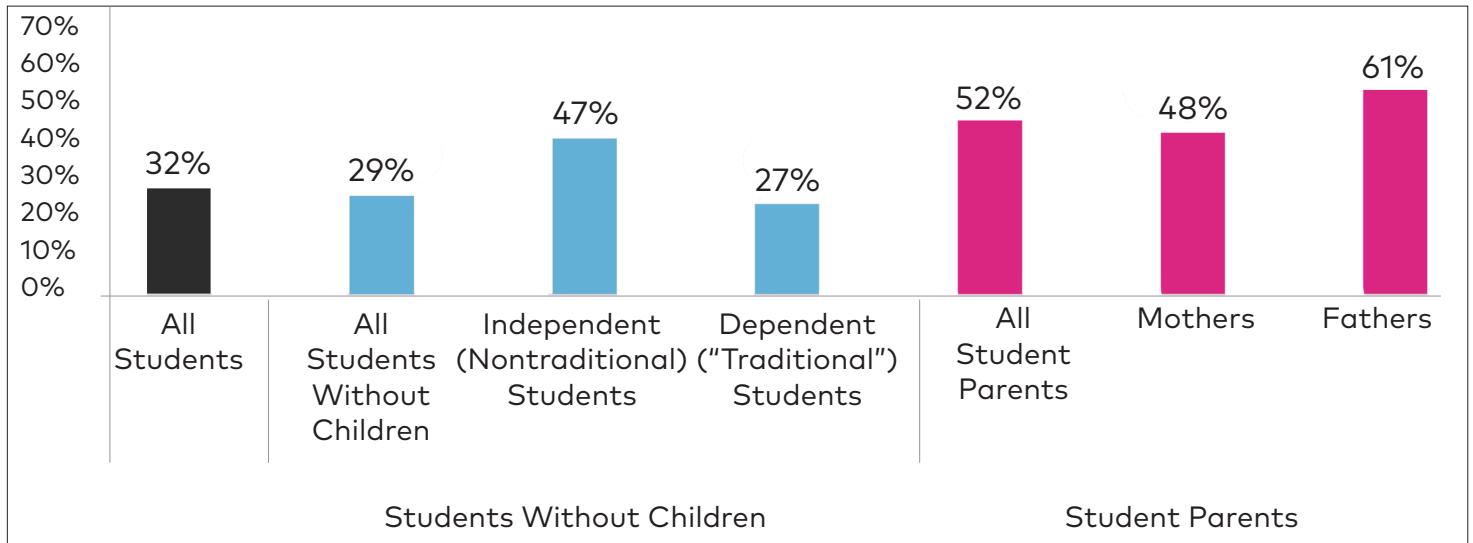
<sup>2</sup> The BPS follows a cohort of first-time enrolled, beginning undergraduate students, who are surveyed three times over a time period of six years, which is equivalent to what is considered “on time” completion of a bachelor’s degree by Federal Student Aid (or 150 percent of program length). Student parents make up 11 percent of the BPS sample of undergraduates (Institute for Women’s Policy Research 2020a).

<sup>3</sup> All student parents are considered independent by the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Students who are “independent” are those who have at least one of the following characteristics: they are at least 24 years old; married; a graduate or professional student; a veteran; an orphan, in foster care, or ward of the court; a member of the armed forces; an emancipated minor; someone who is homeless or at risk of homelessness; or they have legal dependents other than a spouse.



**FIGURE 1. Student Parents are Nearly Twice as Likely to Leave College without a Degree as Students without Children**

*Share of Students Who Left College without a Degree within Six Years of Enrollment, 2012-2017*



Note: All student parents are considered independent students by the Free Application for Federal Student Aid.  
 Source: Institute for Women’s Policy Research analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2012/17 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:12/17).

Nearly two thirds of community college student parents (62 percent) and over half of single student parents (54 percent), Black student parents (58 percent), and student parents with infants (56 percent) leave college without earning a degree or certificate (Appendix Table 1 and Appendix Table 2).

When looking at student parents’ likelihood of suspending college enrollment before graduation by gender, additional patterns emerge. Larger majorities of student fathers—especially single fathers (71 percent), Black and Latinx fathers (72 percent and 66 percent, respectively), and fathers at public four-year institutions (70 percent)—leave college before completing their programs than student parents overall and student mothers (Appendix Table 2). Black student fathers are the most likely to leave without a degree and without return compared with other students with and without children, are they 1.7 times more likely to do so than Black students overall.

These data pose important questions for future research, which should explore more deeply the factors which cause student fathers, especially Black fathers, to leave college at much higher rates than other students, and what intentional policy and practice changes could improve their ability to persist. In addition, collecting data on students who are parents and their enrollment and persistence patterns in light of COVID-19 will be essential to understanding the scope of the effect of the pandemic and economic downturn on current and prospective students with children, and to informing recovery and reengagement efforts moving forward.

## LEARNING FROM STUDENT PARENTS' LIVED EXPERIENCE

While much of the work to serve and understand adult learners acknowledges that pregnancy and parenting can be salient factors for adults' postsecondary experience, relatively little attention has been paid to understanding the distinct experiences and needs of adults who are parents who left college before graduating. Because of the stark contrast in stop-out rates among student parents compared with their peers without children, applying an explicit parenthood lens is essential to unpacking how adults progress through their educational journeys, and how institutions and policymakers could improve their prospects of success.

**While much of the work to serve and understand adult learners acknowledges that pregnancy and parenting can be salient factors for adults' postsecondary experience, relatively little attention has been paid to understanding the distinct experiences and needs of adults with some college credit who are parents.**

To fill this gap in the literature and learn directly from the lived experiences of student parents, IWPR conducted 11 interviews with student parents who have taken breaks from college enrollment of at least one year.<sup>4</sup> IWPR was connected to these students through its partners who work directly with student parents through scholarship programs, advocacy groups, or advisory boards.

Researchers sought to interview a diverse set of student parents who had experienced varying trajectories through higher education. Of the 11 interviewees, seven have reengaged with their college careers since they initially paused their college pursuits. Five have attained an associate degree since reenrolling, and four are still contemplating the right time to return. Nine interviewees were mothers, including six who were single mothers at some point during their enrollment, and two were married fathers. Five had three or more children, four had attended three or more colleges, and at least four had taken a break from enrollment of more than a decade. The majority of interviewees were 30 or older; five were over 40 years of age. While not all interviewees chose to identify their race/ethnicity, three student parents identified as Latino/a, three identified as Black, and two identified as white.

Interviews took place between May and August 2020. Despite the ongoing global pandemic at this time, conversations largely focused on parents' past trajectories in and out of higher education and their perspectives on how their institutions could better support their success, independent of current events. The perspectives and advice shared in these conversations, however, are especially pertinent in light of the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on parents, especially mothers; families of color and those with low incomes; and students at community colleges, especially Black and Indigenous students (Artiga, Garfield, and Orgera 2020; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center 2020; Reichlin Cruse, Contreras-Mendez, and Holtzman 2020). Student parents sit at the intersection of these groups, and for many, the pandemic has forced them to reprioritize their educational goals in the face of increased economic insecurity and caregiving demands triggered by COVID-19 (Reichlin

<sup>4</sup> Some names have been changed for privacy at the request of interviewees.



Cruse, Contreras-Mendez, and Holtzman 2020). Recent evidence shows that students who are parents have been significantly more likely to suspend their enrollment plans due to circumstances caused by COVID-19 than those who do not report any caregiving responsibilities (Rothwell 2021; Belfield and Brock 2020). Supporting successful student parent retention, persistence, and graduation has never been more complicated or important, as the county works towards a post-pandemic recovery.

Supporting successful student parent retention, persistence, and graduation has never been more complicated or important, as the county works towards a post-pandemic recovery.

## WHY STUDENT PARENTS LEAVE COLLEGE BEFORE GRADUATING

Student parents' ability to pursue a higher education is intimately connected to a constellation of family, school, work, health, and financial factors that requires a complicated balancing act. When one factor is out of place, the whole system may collapse. The factors that lead students to take an extended break from college often continue to cause issues throughout their educational journeys, which may start and stop multiple times, take place at multiple institutions, and happen over many years. Ultimately, student parents must be able to afford to pursue college, in both concrete financial terms—the costs of tuition and fees, in addition to the costs of living and providing for their families—and in terms of time, family well-being, and emotional bandwidth.



*"It all comes back—I can't stress enough—to having the ability to be able to focus on doing school, to being committed to being in school, and you can only do that if you feel like your kids are comfortable and safe and fed, you can only do that if you have a job that is supportive, and if you have the finances in place." – Adrian*

### "Time Poverty"

Students with children must balance work, college, family caregiving needs, and their children's own education—a balancing act that has only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Caregiving demands layered on top of the demands of work and school can lead student parents to experience "time-poverty," or the lack of time to complete day-to-day responsibilities (Reichlin Cruse et al. 2018; Wladis, Hachey, and Conway 2018). Single mothers attending college full time, for example, spend an average of nine hours per day providing care to their children and on housework—compared with just two hours a day spent on the same activities by single, full-time female students without children (Reichlin Cruse et al. 2018). For many student parents, the demands on their time force them to make tough choices about their priorities and their capacity to pursue college.

*"The biggest challenge is time—we are limited in time... Do I have enough time [and] energy to maintain finances, maintain my classes, and maintain my home?" – Naomi*

*"One of the main reasons I knew that I could not go to school and work at the same time is that [my kids] were much younger then. My now 17-year-old was probably more like two or three and the older ones were 12, 11, and eight. So, it was very difficult to study at home, it was very difficult to find time to get away to go study. That didn't happen at all really. It was very hard to study and do homework, or really just find someone to babysit while I went to school on nights when I had to go to school..." – Adrian*

Campus processes and policies can make it harder for student parents to balance the demands of being a parent, a student, and an employee. Being able to register for needed courses at times that work for their jobs and their children's school or child care schedules can pose a major challenge. As one single student mother described it, scheduling difficulties and lack of support required her to combine parenting and studying, with all of it becoming too much for her to persist:

*"...With school I was only [working] part time, I couldn't do it anymore. It was really hard to arrange the time to get to school, getting a schedule that worked; it was so difficult to get the classes that I needed during the times that I needed during the days that I needed, and then working around having to work outside of school and having my daughter on my own. It was really, really hard. There were so many times when I had my daughter in one hand and my other was for typing. I didn't finish school at that point..." –Alma*

**"There were so many times when I had my daughter in one hand and my other was for typing. I didn't finish school at that point..."**  
– Alma

## Balancing Work with School and Family



Student parents' experience of working while enrolled was a common theme described by interviewees. Some working student parents said they desired a college education because their lack of credentials held back their access to higher positions and pay. Some even had access to employer-sponsored tuition reimbursement programs, though not all were able to take advantage of them. Many, however, were unable or unwilling to enroll in a program because of inflexible or unpredictable work hours, the need to work full time, and in some cases reluctance to relinquish their earnings and employment benefits.



*"We have to navigate a lot more with less flexible schedules." – Waukecha*

Other student parents described needing to work while in school to afford the costs of providing for their family, child care, and college. Yet the need to earn while pursuing an education often also created insurmountable obstacles to enrollment. One mother of four shared the way her early attempts at going to college continually clashed with her need to work:

*"The first three attempts [to get a degree] were fairly soon after I left high school...I just tried at three different [schools] and I kept taking these promotions at work... so my schedules kept changing and I had employment that wouldn't work with my school schedule... And you got to choose between income and going to school, and income wins. And that was a huge, you know, barrier upfront for me going to school, is that I had to work, had to." – Adrian*

*"...you got to choose between income and going to school, and income wins. And that was a huge, you know, barrier upfront for me going to school, is that I had to work, had to." – Adrian*

**"...you got to choose between income and going to school, and income wins. And that was a huge, you know, barrier upfront for me going to school, is that I had to work, had to."  
– Adrian**

Another mother had been a stay-at-home-mom just starting her college career when she lost financial support, her home, and her car as a result of separating from her husband. As a result, she had to suspend her educational pursuit to work full time to support herself and her children.

*"...Having to go to work full time because of [my separation from my husband], because of these responsibilities and needs, I just put [school] on hold. I was like 'okay, I'll get to it one day. Right now, the need is the kids.'" – Naomi*



Working can also cause or exacerbate logistical challenges for student parents who must commute from campus, to work, to their children's school or care arrangement. These challenges are especially stark if they do not have a car or live in an area without reliable public transportation.

*"What nobody thinks about is the travel... because we didn't have a car, we just recently got a vehicle... See in New York I had the subway, I had my options. Here, I took the bus, and the bus ran every hour. So, if I missed the bus, I was done." – Drayton*

The costs of commuting to and from work/school/child care can also push student parents' finances to their limits when combined with unexpected college costs. One single mother expressed frustration at the fact that she had to pay \$400 for a textbook for her class—that it did not end up using—which could have covered two car payments instead.

### Securing Affordable Child Care that Meets Family Needs

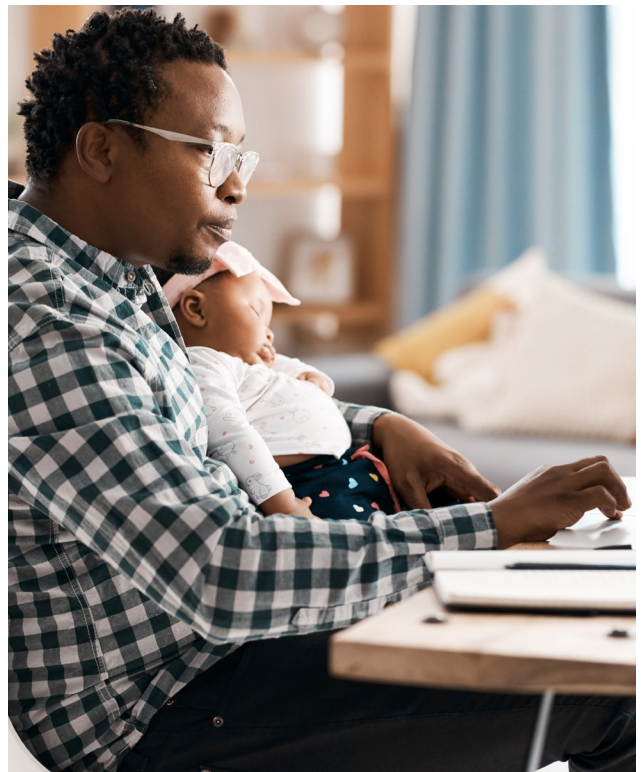
The limited time student parents have for the “triple duty” of being a parent, a student, and an employee makes access to safe, reliable, and convenient care for their children especially important. A growing body of evidence suggests that access to affordable child care can make a major difference in student parents' ability to persist to completion (CCSSE 2020; Chase-Lansdale et al. 2017; DeMario 2017; Gardner, Brooks-Gunn, and Chase-Lansdale 2017; Hess et al. 2014; Reichlin Cruse et al. 2018). Likewise, those who do not have access to the care they need often find themselves making tough decisions about whether to continue with their education. Interviewees described taking advantage of any and all care options available to them to make it work:

*“I utilized all child care options, preschool, after-school programs, family and friends, adopt a family programs, built in community supports for drop offs and pickups...”*  
– Waukecha

The inability to find affordable child care that met their family's needs was a primary barrier to student parents' ability to remain enrolled. One mother described the process of finding infant care as “horrendous,” while another mother of four described how hard it was to find care she needed to go to school and could afford. Another mother referred to high-quality child care costs as “astronomical” and echoed the need to find trustworthy and safe child care providers.

*“Child care, in my opinion, has always been awful, so I have not utilized it as much as one would think. I basically relied on my family network—on my mother, my sister or whoever was in town at the time, to support babysitting while I was in school... It's so expensive, it's incredibly expensive for day care, so that was another reason that [paying for child care] was, like, not an option really... and nobody pays for day care for someone to go to school, they will only pay for day care to go to work, so any day care for time in school is paid out of pocket.”*  
– Adrian

Some student parents described living in child care deserts where care they could afford was nearly impossible to find. In some cases, they ended up bringing their children to class with them or missing class entirely as a result. One student parent who



could not afford child care shared a story of her mother caring for her newborn while she completed a final exam:

*"My first quarter [of college] happened during the last trimester of my pregnancy. I had my baby on a Tuesday and went back to class on a Friday for a final. That was the worst two hours of my life because I breastfed before leaving and my mom called me while I was in the middle of class saying, 'you need to hurry up and come home because she won't stop crying.'" – Christianna*

**"I had my baby on a Tuesday and went back to class on a Friday for a final. That was the worst two hours of my life because I breastfed before leaving and my mom called me while I was in the middle of class saying, 'you need to hurry up and come home because she won't stop crying.'" – Christianna**

**"As I dropped out of the nursing program, I felt like I was forced to abandon my original career choice because my circumstances (lack of child care) created too many obstacles."  
– Irene**

Student parents interviewed by IWPR emphasized the challenge of finding care arrangements that aligned with their course schedules, which change each term and are dependent on the availability of specific classes needed for degree or certificate programs. This challenge was particularly extreme for parents with multiple children in different care arrangements, especially if their schedules were not aligned.

*"My original degree program was nursing and there were many classes that required labs... Although the classes and lab work I needed were offered on the weekends or in the early evening...as much as I tried to schedule my classes when I had child care and/or when my children were in school, there was always a barrier; either the classes were not offered during that time or I was able to enroll in the lecture portion of the class but not the lab. As I dropped out of the nursing program, I felt like I was forced to abandon my original career choice because my circumstances (lack of child care) created too many obstacles. In the end, I was committed and found a degree program that worked and didn't allow my lack of child care to shift my focus away from my academic goals." – Irene*



## Covering the Financial Costs of College and Family

The enormous financial burden associated with college enrollment has put higher education increasingly out of reach for many students. Adults with some college credit who stopped out before earning a degree are often particularly likely to face financial barriers to college, especially if they hold student debt from past enrollment (Scott-Clayton 2018; The Institute for College Access & Success 2018).



**"[Paying for] child care and [having] the ability to provide for your family and to pay for school at the same time is just hard, period."  
– Adrian**

Student parents, in particular, have unique financial demands compared with the 18-24-year-old "traditional" college student; some may have mortgages, pay child support, support children who are in college, or care for elderly family members. These demands add additional burdens to the financial obligations normally associated with college. Many described difficulties in meeting their families' basic needs.

*"[Paying for] child care and [having] the ability to provide for your family and to pay for school at the same time is just hard, period...[To meet my needs as a student parent] I used every resource available to me and that's everything from going to a food pantry to supplement the food you have to make sure you have enough food in the house; I've done that many times." – Adrian*

While student parent interviewees described receiving federal financial aid and public assistance, taking out loans, receiving scholarships, and applying for emergency aid, for many, these sources were often not accessible or not enough for them to make ends meet. Student mothers expressed frustration at how little their Pell grants covered of their expenses as parents and adults.



*"I feel that I should get more Pell grant than a student who doesn't have children, because I have a kid, I'm providing for not one, but two people, and only having \$1,000 for one quarter... that's not going to cover rent, child care... I had an interview with a job [at a child care center] and they charge \$1,500 a month for child care—a month! That [Pell grant] is supposed to last us the whole quarter, and we have to buy books on top of that. The Pell grant I receive is just not enough and it's not only affecting us but our children and their experience too." – Christianna*

*"They don't consider any parenting expenses [in determining financial aid awards] except for child care. There are other needs such as kids' clothing, food, school supplies, extra transportation for kids, utilities, educational expenses for teens, such as [Advanced Placement] testing [fees]." – Aaliyah*

A number of interviewees described instances where they misunderstood the financial aid application process, eligibility requirements, award letters, time limits, and/or available opportunities for increased aid. Many parenting students have complex financial situations that make it difficult to navigate financial aid applications and awards, such as going through a divorce and therefore having a change in family income. Institutions also often do not provide upfront information on the dependent care allowance, for example, which can



increase a student's federal grant or loan eligibility (U. S. Government Accountability Office 2019). One mother was forced to suspend her college enrollment because she could not get the financial assistance she needed, since her original federal aid award was based on her family income before she separated from her husband.

*"I did not qualify for Pell because my ex-husband was making \$90,000 and I had to wait a whole year to go back." – Aaliyah*

Student parents also reported challenges related to student loans and money owed to their institutions. For student parents who have existing student debt, and/or are struggling to meet basic needs, the inability to pay off even small debts can cause them to delay their return to college.

For example, one student mother was faced with paying \$3,000 for two courses she took that were not covered by financial aid because they did not technically count for her degree program—despite receiving guidance that they would be beneficial to her career path. Faced with this debt, she took off four years to pay it off.

*"I was in school for two years before they took [my Pell grant] away from me...I was so close to being done and the only obstacle was that I had to stop school so I could pay back what I owed...even though, when talking to the department leads in the nursing program about those two classes I had taken, they said they'd be beneficial and better fit for my program." – Christianna*

This experience was echoed by another mother who described having to take a six-month break from school so she could pay back \$4,600 owed to her institution. She cobbled together money from a range of sources, including her CARES Act stimulus check and a scholarship,

**"I was in school for two years before they took [my Pell grant] away from me...I was so close to being done and the only obstacle was that I had to stop school so I could pay back what I owed..."**  
– Christianna

to cover this debt, though her school's policy around holding transcripts when a student owes a debt complicated her ability to access the scholarship funds that she needed to pay it off and eventually be able to reenroll. This mother and a number of other interviewees stressed the fact that they took any and every opportunity to seek financial support to help them pay for college and for nontuition expenses, including the CARES Act stimulus checks and emergency grants, though even those sources could be problematic.

*"Emergency funds can frequently take up to eight weeks for a response and even longer for a confirmation of approval. This is a critical time in which a student parent might be forced to drop out, get his lights cut, face eviction, take on a second job, be forced to remove their child from child care because the co-pay becomes too much of a burden, thus creating a chain of other avoidable obstacles." – Ariel*



Combined with the impact of excessive student debt on prospects for wealth building, especially among students of color and student parents, reducing the financial burden of college on student parents is essential to increasing equitable outcomes in degree attainment (Goldrick-Rab et al. 2019; Houle and Addo 2018; Institute for Women's Policy Research and Ascend at the Aspen Institute 2019).

### Coping with Trauma and Life Circumstances

**"So, I took a break from school—my family, my kids were a priority. College felt too big to carry at the time."**

**– Irene**

A number of student parent interviewees reported life experiences and trauma that affected their educational journeys. Experiences of homelessness, domestic violence, addiction, and child illness and mental health issues, among others, reverberated throughout student parents' lives, affecting their ability to afford college as well as their mental health.

Student parents' educational aspirations were repeatedly set aside so they could care for their families and themselves. One student mother described caring for her family as her husband sought treatment for addiction:

*"Addiction is common in my husband's family, and he developed an addiction after our second daughter was born. My GPA dropped as my husband spiraled downwards and my finances were drained as he entered treatment. We moved in with my in-laws in California to cope with the financial losses and while my husband was in treatment there. So, I took a break from school—my family, my kids were a priority. College felt too big to carry at the time." – Irene*



Coping with troubled or abusive relationships, and the implications of breaking up with a partner for caregiving responsibilities, were also common themes mentioned by student mothers.



*"That first semester was fine, but then towards second semester, the relationship itself was toxic and volatile. And I think me pursuing higher education to better myself was a threat to his ego... I remember one of the things he said during the breakup...he was trying to set me up for failure...I don't think...he didn't really believe that I could do it. He said, 'you wouldn't be successful in school if I wasn't here to help you,' and...I kind of believed him,*

*and...I dropped out of school that next semester because it was just too much, I lost my child care with him leaving."* – Waukecha

In one case, leaving a violent partner led one single mother and her daughter to seek refuge at a shelter for survivors of domestic violence. For this student, living in a shelter gave her and her daughter a place to sleep but it also imposed restrictions on her movement and social interaction that were isolating; going to school offered an opportunity to connect with others that she could not get elsewhere.

*"At the time [when I was first enrolled in college], I was living in a domestic violence shelter, so I had curfews and I couldn't be anywhere without telling anyone where I was at. I couldn't even have family or friends visit me... I was really isolated at that time and school was the only time when I was able to interact with people."* – Christianna

Despite having obvious implications for her ability to complete coursework, this mother's situation was not taken into account by her professors in their expectations of her.

*"A lot of teachers...hold us to the same standard that they held themselves...But, what kind of supports did you have when you were getting your degree? What was your mental health like when you were getting your degree? Because I started school coming out of an abusive relationship and I was in a homeless shelter and I was just having a child... My life is not simple."* – Christianna

Across the board, student parents described experiencing significant strain of balancing school, parenting, work, commuting, and other life responsibilities, especially for those with personal health conditions or with children with special needs.

*"When you are a student parent, you are just surviving and that takes an emotional and physical toll." – Waukecha*

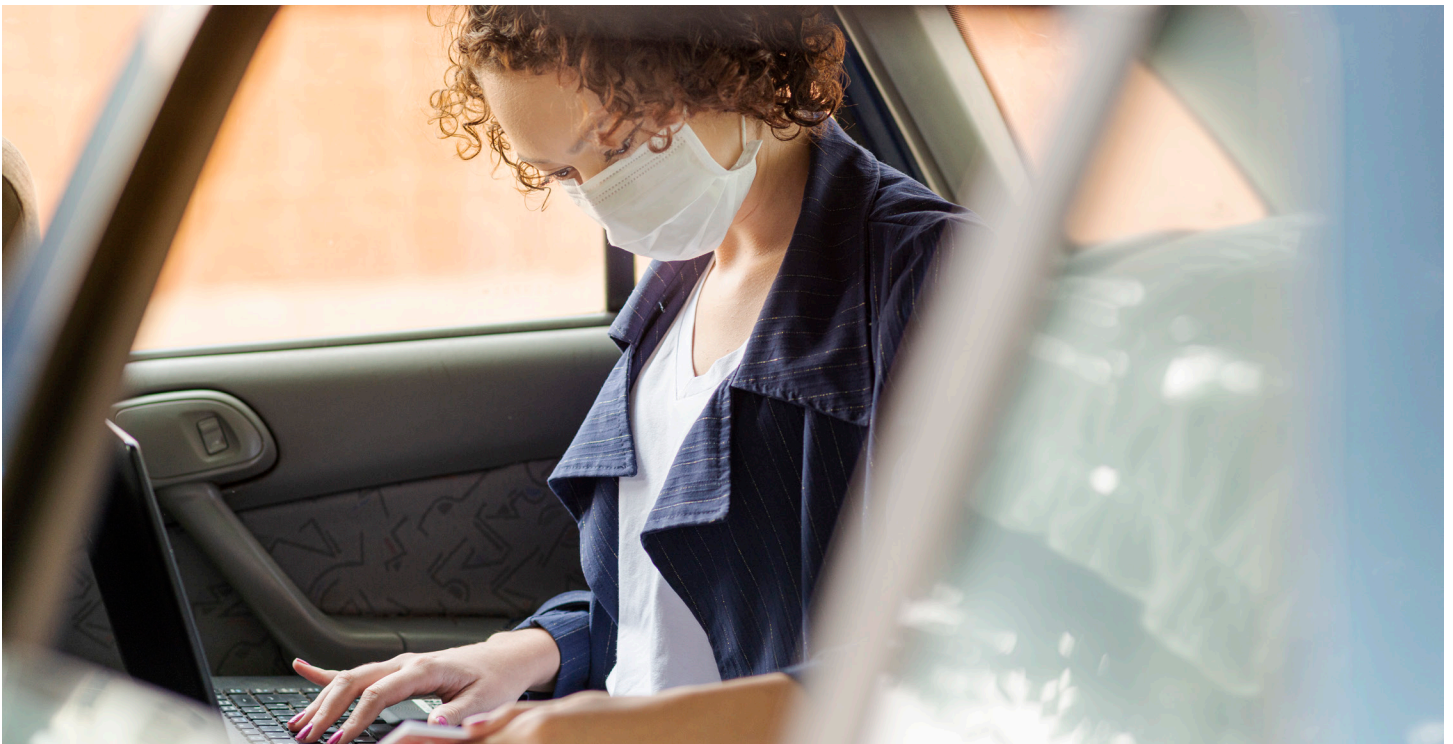
To cope with this strain, one parent shared her strategy for getting through each day:

*"It's not just the boundaries as in the rules for the whole house, the individuals, and for others outside of the house, it's also personal rules...'Mom's going to go take a 15-minute nap and you're going to be quiet and you're going to respect that,' because if I don't put on my air mask first, I cannot help them..."*  
– Naomi

A number of interviewees described regularly seeing therapists both before and during their college enrollment. The mental health support they received was noted as particularly helpful in working through both the traumas they had experienced and their decisions to ultimately go back to school later in life, as well as essential to their ability to cope during COVID-19. While not examined directly by this study, the COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly exacerbated obstacles to college persistence that many student parents already faced, as families around the country cope with the ongoing health and economic crises.

**"I don't want mental health to get lost; especially for trauma survivors, especially for parents who are single...We're all going to have remnants of trauma after the pandemic."  
– Waukecha**

*"Mental health support contributed to my decision to going back to school but it's [also] part of my support system to stay in school. It should be a student service because... even now, I rely heavily on my therapist to manage self-care... I don't want mental health to get lost; especially for trauma survivors, especially for parents who are single...We're all going to have remnants of trauma after the pandemic." – Waukecha*



## THE RETURNING STUDENT PARENT EXPERIENCE

Student parents' decision to return to campus is often not an easy one and returning does not mean there are no longer obstacles to overcome. Some of these obstacles are ever-present for students with children, regardless of where in their educational journeys they are; others stem from the specific experience of starting over as adult students. The following section highlights themes around the experience of returning to college, from why student parents make the decision to the challenges they face and the supports that propel them forward.

### Why Student Parents Reenroll

Student parents' decisions to reenroll in college are often multifaceted, motivated by their goals and aspirations for themselves, their careers, and their children's futures. One single mother described the birth of her son as a significant turning point:



*"Five years ago, I just had my youngest son, and I realized that I had changed, that I had bigger goals for my life. I had experienced a big trauma during my pregnancy, which catapulted me into the realm of self-improvement and opened up opportunities to see where my potential could lead me." – Waukecha*

A number of interviewees articulated how their pursuit of higher education sets an example for their children and sets them up to thrive in the future:

*"My children [keep me motivated], they were the beginning. They were the reason [I went to school]...even after the divorce, even after all that I went through... it's for them, but also for me....but they are my main focus...As a mother, we are expected to sacrifice...[and we are] teaching [our kids] to sacrifice....I want them to grow, I want them to excel; I don't want them to sacrifice...So I have to want that for me, because if I don't illustrate it, then they won't know how to do it." – Naomi*

*"As far of breaking that generational curse and that barrier for our family...[my wife and I] are both the first in our family to obtain a postsecondary degree, or even a high school degree, so I feel like it's going to make a huge impact because it elevates the bar for my son and my daughter." – Ariel*

Career advancement was also cited by a number of interviewees as motivating their decision to return, though their desire to progress in their jobs was often twofold—to both achieve greater professional success and satisfaction and bolster their ability to provide for their families. As



one mother described, having a child combined with experiencing a job loss triggered her drive to seek a higher education:

*"Initially I hadn't planned on having kids, but I got pregnant and started looking at life with a different filter. We started looking for neighborhoods with good schools, but they were expensive.... In New York, I had a good job that paid well without my needing a college education. In Pennsylvania, I got a similar job...but was laid off while I was on maternity leave. So, all of a sudden, I had a baby and no job... and a part of my brain that had been dormant woke up, and everything became about providing for my baby."*  
– Irene

**"Initially I hadn't planned on having kids, but I got pregnant and started looking at life with a different filter."  
– Irene**

A number of interviewees described hitting a ceiling at their current jobs because of their lack of a higher degree. One shared that she thought she could rise up in the corporate world without a degree but eventually realized that would not be possible. Another was presented with an opportunity for promotion but was held back by his lack of a bachelor's degree:

*"After you work there 10 years, and you don't have a degree to be a manager or a supervisor...Part of me wanting to get my B.A. was I was offered a [general manager] position and I didn't have my B.A. so, you know, I couldn't take the job...My boss said, 'in two years I'm going to leave...' and she just thought I was a perfect fit [for her role].... She asked me 'do you have your degree?' and I said 'no'...so she told me to go back and go get it." – Drayton*

## **Experiencing College as a Returning Student Parent**

### ***The Benefits of Being an Adult and Parent Learner***

Student parents returning to campus after taking a prolonged break are often older than many of their peers. While this caused some anxiety, for many interviewees their age and life experience also empowered them to effectively advocate for themselves and strengthened their capacity as students.

*"I always thought that being older would be a negative, but you develop perspective from experience, and a certain empathy once you go through your own setbacks and challenges and sacrifices with family. It enables you to help people; life experience is an education in itself." – Irene*

Many said, for example, that being older meant they had more confidence and less anxiety about reaching out with questions and seeking the resources and information they needed to be successful. Whereas, when they started college initially, they might have avoided seeking help or stopped trying to get needed information after running into roadblocks, now they were able to push past their anxiety to navigate the college system. Interviewees also expressed

the feeling that they had become better time managers as adults and parents, a skill that can promote success in the classroom — in addition to feeling more clarity around their chosen career path — as a result of their life experiences.

*"I'm busy but I'm busy with purpose. There's a goal in sight." - Waukecha*

Being a parent changed student parents' experience of campus life. Interviewees described identifying as "parents first," spending as much time on campus as was necessary before returning home to care for their families. The experience of seeing and interacting with other adult learners on campus was, therefore, noted as particularly beneficial. Having other parents and adult learners on campus, knowing that others were having similar experiences, and being able to share with and lean on each other for support came as a relief to many student parents interviewed.

**"I felt a mutual encouragement....seeing others doing the same thing with small children."  
- Irene**

*"I see everything through the filter of my kids, so the campus culture geared toward younger students didn't register for me... I found that fellow adult learners that I was able to cross paths with...I just found them to be extremely dedicated and just focused and very smart, you know? But they were also dealing with these very, very challenging circumstances...I felt a mutual encouragement...seeing others doing the same thing with small children." – Irene*

In contrast, campuses that were perceived as having fewer adult students led to greater feelings of alienation and impressions that the school was more focused on promoting the "ideal" college experience rather than building an environment that would be welcoming to both younger and older students.

### **Operating within Systems Designed for "Traditional" Students**

Though being an adult and a parent brought some interviewees a level of confidence they did not have as younger students, the contrast between their age and their peers' also caused feelings of anxiety. In response to a question about what it was like to go back after a two-decade break, one father described feeling fear:



*"The first thing that came to my head was of course my age, I'm old, and I'm going to sit in class with a bunch of young people that I don't connect with, don't associate with.... My journey in being older and going back in to sign up [for classes]—the process had changed from what I knew it to be and it was just so much, and I ended up not doing it by myself." – Drayton*

This fear was born out in the design of campus policies and services. Many interviewees highlighted the experience that their campus was



intentionally designed for younger, “traditional” students and not with student parents in mind.

*“Everything is centered around the traditional family, the traditional student, you know, there’s not much consideration for the outliers—we’re outliers...There is not enough focus on single parents returning to school. There’s a ton of resources if you are a veteran or in the military... a ton of resources for traditional students. But there’s hardly anything out there for adult single parents who are returning to school.” – Adrian*

For example, orientation and course registration often do not account for the needs of student parents who have inflexible work or child care schedules. Parents may have to take off work or secure alternative child care arrangements to accommodate orientation or other required in-person events related to enrollment and registration:

*“You have to check all the boxes before enrolling in classes, including attending an orientation and paying student fees, which are \$225. These can be barriers for student parents. When can I call out of work for the orientation, which is from 8am-4pm? And I have two kids, so that timing is okay for drop off but picking them up after 4pm is really hard; you have to be really aware of traffic...The last orientation I was able to do was at the end of July and since classes started that next month, everyone had already selected all the classes. There was no real opportunity for me to get the classes I wanted and my first semester didn’t make any sense. I was spending my money and using my time on classes that weren’t with my business major.” – Ariel*

**“Understand that single moms are always going to be playing catch up...I may be late with my work, but it gets done.”  
– Christianna**

Student parents also described having trouble adhering to strict requirements around attendance, office hours, advising, and coursework. Work and child care schedules and other family care responsibilities often become overwhelming in the face of rigid policies that do not accommodate individual student needs. Single mothers in particular stressed that they would complete schoolwork only after their children would go to sleep, sometimes having to turn assignments in late despite working at all hours. In extreme cases, student parents reported professors saying that they should be making a choice between their children and their education, exhibiting a lack of empathy and understanding of the complexity of their students’ lives. As one student mother put it:

**“Everything is centered around the traditional family, the traditional student, you know, there’s not much consideration for the outliers—we’re outliers.” – Adrian**



*"Student parents should not have to explain what they are doing when they are not in class. Understand that single moms are always going to be playing catch up...I may be late with my work, but it gets done." – Christianna*

Assumptions around students' available time for extracurricular activities affected parents' access to financial support and ability to participate in groups like honor societies. Interviewees described scholarships that had certain activity requirements, such as community service hours, that were assumed to fit easily within "traditional" students' lives but created problems for students with families and jobs.

*"A lot of the scholarships and financial assistance programs required you to be active in the community and on campus. As someone trying to juggle being a parent, my marriage, my household... that is my community service; these programs are geared to students coming out of high school, rather than adults with lives of their own who might not have time to get involved in that way." – Irene*

### **Lack of Guidance for Navigating Educational Pathways**



Assumptions that returning adults and student parents need less guidance than younger or first-time college students can make it challenging for them to navigate reentry into the college environment. Many interviewees described returning to campus after a prolonged break and feeling unfamiliar with how to navigate the college system and campus life. This was especially pronounced when taking into account the differences between four-year institutions and community colleges.

*"Going into the four-year space was an intimidating transition. It felt like going from high school to community college—I didn't know what to expect, didn't know how big of a transition it would be... During my orientation, one of the advisors gave off a seriously intimidating tone about the university and the coursework, making it sound like if you have anything else going on in your life that will take away from your schoolwork, then you won't make it. She introduced a mental barrier before I even signed up for a single class...instead of [saying] 'we're here for you for whatever you need help with.'" – Ariel*

**"Being in a two-year college and being able to know your professors and them knowing you is what got me by."  
– Drayton**

*"I'll say this, if I had done it in a four-year setting, I don't think I would have done it. Being in a two-year college and being able to know your professors and them knowing you is what got me by." – Drayton*

A number of parents expressed frustration at not receiving the guidance they needed to avoid taking courses that did not ultimately count toward their degree programs. This often resulted

**"But no one was there to help me plan out that schedule; I was there for three semesters and had no help to figure out which classes I needed to take or what I might want to do."  
– Waukecha**

in unnecessary student debt and the decision to suspend enrollment, delaying parents' ability to graduate.

*"Enrolling in college as a nontraditional student, there was an expectation that you know more because you're older or you've been to another college. So, the intense advising that typically happens for freshman did not happen for me." – Bianca*

Even programs designed for adults did not always offer the level of support students needed to succeed:

*"The program was supposed to be an accelerated program for working adults, four classes per semester broken down into eight weeks. But no one was there to help me plan out that schedule; I was there for three semesters and had no help to figure out which classes I needed to take or what I might want to do. So, I started with business management, took accounting courses, decided I hated it - but counselors didn't help guide me to where I wanted to be or [to figure out] what my goals were. I had to learn to advocate for myself." – Waukecha*

## **Obstacles to Accessing Financial Assistance**

### **Gaps in Federal Financial Aid for Returning Student Parents**

Challenges accessing needed financial assistance for college and family expenses was a common theme in IWPR's interviews. Interviewees shared numerous instances where financial aid was necessary but not sufficient to meet their basic and educational needs. For example, many student parents interviewed described reaching the lifetime maximum for federal financial aid. Since student parents often take longer to complete their degree programs than "traditional" students, reaching the maximum limit for receipt of federal aid is not uncommon. Adult students with low incomes who have reached this maximum aid limit can submit an appeal to regain eligibility, but it is a burdensome and opaque process that does not guarantee success (Riley 2019; Taylor and Bicak 2019). Without financial aid, student parents either have to pay for school out of pocket or forgo enrollment entirely.

*"Parents are maxing out their financial aid for two-year degrees. It took me five years to get my associate degree. If I would have known you can tap out of financial aid, I would have done my courses differently and wouldn't have needed to ask for an appeal."  
– Drayton*

Paying for college as a returning student is more difficult for parents who are also covering college costs for their children. During the 2015-16 academic year, student parents contributed a median of \$1,500 out of pocket towards their children's college costs and 31 percent contributed \$5,000 or more (not including loans; Institute for Women's Policy Research 2020c). To afford both, some student parents take out loans, such as Parent PLUS loans, increasing their student debt. Without additional financial supports for student parents whose children

are in college, the burden of financing their own education in combination with a child's can force parents to pause or cease their efforts to earn a degree.

*"So, two of my kids went to school before I did...so of course I signed for loans for them to go to school when they needed those, and I also didn't know if I was ever going to go back to school. But the thought never crossed my mind that one would have an effect on the other. So, when I went back to school, within 2.5 years of my being in school they said, 'you have exhausted your lifetime financial aid'...I had about \$40,000 in Parent Plus loans for my kids to go to school...So I have been paying out of pocket and with scholarships for the last year and a half." – Adrian*

In addition, the ongoing global pandemic has intensified student parents' financial needs. While data on student parents' enrollment patterns since COVID-19 are limited, it is likely that the economic instability and uncertainty triggered by the pandemic have forced many student parents to delay or discontinue their education.

### **Accessing Needed Public Assistance**



Efforts to improve student parent persistence and reengagement must recognize that basic needs insecurity plays a defining role in more students' lives than was previously understood. Many student parents interviewed for this study reported utilizing all resources and services available to them—including community and campus services, such as food and diaper banks and veterans', mental health, and disability services—in addition to federal public benefit programs. Assistance from programs such as Section 8 housing assistance; Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF); Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) assistance; and Head Start/Early Head Start often acted as a lifeline for student parent families to make ends meet.

*"Getting SNAP, qualifying for TANF—which comes with gas cards for each adult, \$50 per adult per month—getting Medicaid... it didn't balance out 100% but it was a crutch that helped us in the meantime." – Ariel*

*"I am thankful to have had the Washington State Child Care Connection subsidy, and at one point [to have] received food benefits and WIC, which was helpful because my son had special needs." – Bianca*

Many interviewees, however, faced repeated obstacles to accessing needed assistance. In particular, strict income and work requirements often made student parents ineligible to receive





support, or caused them to lose eligibility, forcing them to reapply. For some the demands of being a parent and a student made the requirement to work significant hours—sometimes as many as 20 hours per week—particularly difficult to manage. For others, who worked while enrolled in order to balance the financial demands of college with providing for their families, their income was both not enough to full meet their family's basic needs and too much to allow them to qualify.

Accessing child care assistance was described as particularly challenging. One single mother described having an income that was just over the income threshold for child care assistance, even though her income was not enough to pay for child care. Another father shared that he had to work significant hours while enrolled just to meet the criteria required for receiving child care assistance:

*"They cut our TANF because my financial aid status put me over the max. So, they cut that and now I had to work. So, they put us on the food stamp program, but that program required 20 hours of work. If I didn't work, I wasn't getting the criteria of having my child care paid for. The only reason I took the BFET program is we were paying \$800 for child care."<sup>5</sup>  
– Drayton*

Parents who were able to establish eligibility still faced a number of obstacles to maintaining the assistance they needed. For example, small changes in work hours or income could result in them losing eligibility or having to readjust the amount of assistance they were qualified to receive. These situations often required student parents to spend significant time making phone calls to case managers, completing additional paperwork, collecting required documentation, and going through the appeal process when faced with a denial.

*"The other thing that needs improvement is renewal processes for...child care. It needs to be more expedited; it takes way, way, way too long for them to get back to you—sometimes it takes a month. You have a change in income, and it will be a month, month and a half, 'til they say, 'okay this is what you're going to pay starting next month.' So, it can be a month or two turnaround by the time they see you took a hit and say that your copay for child care should be less now." – Ariel*

*"When my hours changed slightly...even though I'm still working the number of hours that are required, now because I didn't tell you that I went from 8-5 from 7-4, you're freaking out and not authorizing my child care subsidy. So, now I have a bigger problem because I don't have child care while you're trying to figure out how long I was screwing the system." – Bianca*

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<sup>5</sup> BFET, the acronym for the Basic Food, Employment, and Training Program, is Washington State's SNAP Employment and Training (E&T) program.

## Adapting to Campus Technology and Remote Learning

The emergence of technological solutions to the provision of student services and education has become an increasingly defining feature of the modern college campus—and even more so with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviewees reported that, in some cases, online courses, services, and advising provided via e-mail, video communication, and e-learning platforms were helpful to their ability to access services, attend classes, and participate in group work.



The availability of online classes helped some student parents balance caregiving demands with school, including eliminating travel time to school and reducing transportation costs such as parking. One mother shared the benefits of online courses in helping to meet her caregiving demands:

*“One of the main reasons I started going [to college] online is because I live in a child care desert and both my parents work full time and it’s hard to find child care. When I don’t have child care, I make sure my next set of classes are online in order to be able to be home.” – Christianna*

For older student parents who returned to campus after breaks of a decade or more, the integration of technology into the learning process was a big adjustment, though still beneficial for some.

*“The biggest difference now is the technology that is there to support... I prefer pen and paper and I like in-person classroom settings, but it does help to have all of the different technology supports available to be able to group chat with partners as opposed to several in-person meetings, to be able to share documents quickly with people to have them reviewed or support each other.” – Adrian*

Summer transition programs that helped students learn new technologies and online systems were particularly beneficial to student parents who had not been in a college environment for some time.

*“They walked us through the process of registering for school. You do one semester of what’s called Sea Salt...which I’m so happy I did because it got me back into computers... it let me learn how to use Blackboard, it let me learn how to use the programs that we were going to use in school. The whole summer semester was just dedicated to learning how to be on campus and in school. And I think every child and person should go through [it] because it laid the foundation for me.” – Drayton*

Online learning did not come without its challenges, however, and many student parents interviewed expressed a preference for in-person learning.

*"For me the in-class experience is much more valuable and is my learning style and I need to be in that seat in order for me to learn. Ultimately, learning online [due to COVID-19] just does not work for me and I ended up failing both of my classes this [Spring 2020] semester." – Ariel*

One student mother who relies on and prefers online educational programs shared her observation of the challenges her peers faced in navigating the remote learning environment:

*"There is no cookie cutter way of delivering online learning, which creates a challenge for students to navigate and get used to. It would be helpful to know upfront that things are going to vary and that [students] will need to advocate for themselves and ask questions of professors to get that clarity. Student parents are intimidated of distance learning because of the technology and many prefer in-person classes... partly due to fear of the unknown." – Waukecha*

Greater access to remote student services would have improved experiences of online education for a number of interviewees, some of whom reported that even when they were enrolled in remote or hybrid learning programs, services were not always offered remotely, meaning they had to go to campus to get access.

### **The Benefits of Campus Child Care**

Though campus child care is declining nationally, especially on community college campuses where student parents are most likely to be enrolled, a number of student parents interviewed were able to secure campus-based care for their children at some point in their educational careers (Gault, Reichlin Cruse, and Schumacher 2019). For many, having their children at the campus center meant more than just having a high-quality, safe environment for their children while they were in class or at work—though these aspects of campus-based care were cited as incredibly important as well. The simple presence of their children on campus with them, seeing their children while they were in class, came as a huge comfort.



As one student father put it:

*"Being able to see my son on campus in between classes—I really enjoyed that because it allowed my son to see where I was and vice versa." – Drayton*

A mother said that being able to have her child on campus with her made her feel



more comfortable with the sacrifice she felt she was making in spending time away from her children while she was in school:

*"I'd see the kids in strollers while in class, including my kids—that was just very helpful to know, to take away the feeling that I was being selfish by designating my responsibility to someone else."  
— Irene*



For this mother, the **Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS)** program played an important role in her ability to secure campus child care, in addition to her access to a family success coordinator attached to the program who helped her to locate additional resources. She also benefited from CCAMPIS assistance over one summer semester, which she found to be particularly helpful.



### The Impact of Tailored Student Parent Supports

Access to wraparound support programs, especially those designed specifically for student parents, were gamechangers for a number of student parents interviewed. The availability of financial assistance and physical resources combined with services designed specifically for students with children created an umbrella of support, both concrete and emotional.

*"At NOVA, the **Adult Career Pathways** program at the time—there was a dual generation initiative as a part of this. Because I was in work study and in the program, I got the best of both worlds. We benefited a lot—we got access to diapers, wipes, toys, puzzles, learning games—we just had to request what we needed. Diapers were especially huge because they can get expensive."<sup>6</sup>  
— Ariel*

For one single mother, who struggled with paying for child care, getting support from a program in southern California called **Project Self-Sufficiency** enabled her to continue her pursuit of higher education. The concrete financial support and resources provided by the program, combined with the assistance they offered for applying to scholarships, allowed her to take more credits while also helping her cover the cost of care and other expenses. In addition to enabling her to meet her family's basic needs, the knowledge that the program was there for her also provided a source of emotional support:

*"They were like my new boyfriend who wanted to take care of me, someone to take some of this weight off me."  
— Waukecha*

<sup>6</sup> NOVA refers to Northern Virginia Community College.



*"I came across Project Self-Sufficiency in a Google search. They provide a supplement for child care for single moms in school, which at the time was all I cared about. So, I went for the intake and they gave me a \$20 gift card for gas, told me that they'd help with books, with community services like dental services, mechanics, rental assistance, etc. etc. They were like my new boyfriend who wanted to take care of me, someone to take some of this weight off me." – Waukecha*

Another student mother expressed great appreciation of being "seen" by one scholarship program designed explicitly for mothers over age 35 interested in attaining their degree:

*"The **Jeannette Rankin Scholarship**—that was the only scholarship I have ever come across...When I looked at...all the requirements, from just looking at that on paper, it would be all the reasons why you shouldn't go down this path—you have children, your finances—and that was such an incredible opportunity that I was awarded, and just the criteria that was set out, I felt like it embraced a certain type of population that are considered underdogs sometimes in society." – Irene*

## LESSONS FROM STUDENT PARENTS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION AND POLICY LEADERS

The experiences and advice shared with IWPR by returning student parents offer lessons for how institutional and policy leaders should think about reengaging adult learners with children—and for building a more inclusive education system that produces equitable outcomes for student parents and other marginalized students. The following section summarizes some of the overarching recommendations shared by student parents with regard to how their institutions, policymakers, and systems of higher education and social services can promote their success.

- **Provide flexible, tailored support for returning student parents, including intentional, proactive guidance for reentry.** Returning student parents and other adult learners—especially first-generation students who do not have robust networks from which they can seek support—should receive one-on-one guidance from college staff who are trained to serve students with children on topics such as navigating course registration, degree pathways and requirements, financial aid and scholarship eligibility policies, transfer processes, and online systems and other tech-based services. Rules that punish students for small institutional debts should be rescinded to encourage returning students' ability to complete.

**"We want to get in and get out and get this degree." – Ariel**

*"Something that was super helpful was support from Diane, my Educational Support counselor, who was always open and willing to work with me through different choices for school. She would help me plan what was next for me and she was always available to sit down and talk to me about what was going on with my degree plan and provide me feedback on instructors, classes, options...Just having an ally within the system was helpful in navigating when I needed to travel for work but had classes with strict attendance policies. I appreciate those high-touches and that should be the norm." – Adrian*

*"It would be really great if there was some kind of professional development or training [for policymakers and/or higher education leaders] around cultural sensitivity, specifically for [returning student parents], and especially for the financial aid aspect of supports for returning students." – Aaliyah*

*"Poverty should not be used as a tactic to hold rightfully earned credits hostage at any institution." – Ariel*

- **Account for the scheduling and flexibility needs of students who have caregiving and work responsibilities in the development of participation and attendance requirements, as well as the provision of student services and academic advising.** Programs designed to facilitate attainment among adult students, such as evening courses, accelerated programs, and online learning, should ensure participating students get access to the same level of support as students on more traditional pathways, and at times that work for their schedules. Flexibility, understanding, and empathy are essential.





*"If you have evening classes, you need to support your students in the evening. This includes office hours, counseling sessions, etc. We want to get in and get out and get this degree." – Ariel*

*"Think about student parents when putting stipulations on scholarships, such as the heavy emphasis on volunteering. For a single parent in their forties, this is just not feasible.... Understand that student parents don't need volunteer hours to be eligible for scholarships. It's not appropriate."  
– Aaliyah*

- **Build systems, policies, and physical spaces that acknowledge and embrace student parents and their families.** Requirements for financial aid and scholarship receipt must take into account the lives of "nontraditional" students, including parents, and adjust accordingly.

*"Nothing is set up for parents. Just having a space on campus for a mother or father to bring their kids, to have a place to go would be huge. Having an infrastructure for parents is essential..." – Drayton*

*"If policymakers could think of ways for funding sources [to support] adult students, that would be super helpful, especially funding that is versatile to use for whatever that student might need. Finding ways to support women furthering their education is really important right now, but there aren't enough supports in place." – Adrian*

**"Nothing is set up for parents. Just having a space on campus for a mother or father to bring their kids, to have a place to go would be huge."  
– Drayton**

- **Facilitate access to public assistance for student parents with low incomes to improve their ability to become self-sufficient and provide for their families.** Eliminate unnecessary eligibility restrictions that prohibit receipt of benefits for adults enrolled in education and training, including those seeking bachelor's degrees, and raise income thresholds to expand access. Removing structural barriers to public assistance access can improve student parents' ability to enter and complete higher education, especially among single mothers, leading to significant economic returns to individuals and society at large (Reichlin Cruse et al. 2019).

**"...The best way for a policymaker to help is a fully funded child care bill nationwide that allows parents to go to school."  
– Bianca**

*"Let me focus—I'm not trying to take advantage of the system or get one over on you. Help me get the day care, help me pay for that. Help me get food stamps, help me pay for that. Help me pay my rent, help pay for that. If I could focus those two years, I would have finished. That's where policymakers miss it. Trust me instead of looking for the lie." – Drayton*

*"If there's not a child care subsidy system in place for parents who have children who are small who can use it to obtain a bachelor's degree, or dare I say, a master's...To allow people who want to better themselves to be in a situation to better themselves so*

*they don't need assistance and can contribute to bettering the whole system, [that] would be ideal...The best way for a policymaker to help is a fully funded child care bill nationwide that allows parents to go to school." – Bianca*

*"We need to make sure we are looking out for homeless students with children because there is a lack of understanding around this population and the struggles they are going through." – Drayton*

- **Prioritize the provision of affordable, accessible, and high-quality child care options for student parents needing care.** Expand service provision to better meet the needs of student parents who require care during nontraditional hours, during summer and winter breaks, and for infants; increase investments in programs which help student parents afford care, including the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) federal grant program; and establish provisions to support care access for those whose incomes may not qualify them for many child care assistance programs but are also not sufficient to afford the cost of care.



*"There are not enough supports in place to provide quality, readily available evening child care. There may be one or two [evening child care providers] in the city but it can be questionable because they tend to be full and not ideal, but if this was something that was prioritized, more [student parents] could take advantage of it." – Adrian*

*"The CCAMPIS grants I think are absolutely wonderful. To have that also [support] available during the summer—I don't know if extra funding needs to be there—so that while you are on spring break or you are on summer break, perhaps there could be funding put in place for that." – Irene*

*"Having more affordable day care or assistance for families that may not necessarily be low-income would be helpful. There are many families like mine that are not low income and don't qualify for many of the free [child care] programs but this is something that would really help us out [to be able to return to school]. Even just opening up more spaces for children to go to the public school [pre-k] to have that option as child care." – Alma*

- **Increase access to holistic, wraparound support for student parent families.** Wraparound programs that intentionally serve student parents can provide access to needed resources that help meet families' basic needs, including housing, food, transportation, and mental health; provide them with a community of peers; and enable them to persist in school.

*"My first time around, I was ill prepared as a first-generation college student. I didn't know what college was and what it really was going to take, and I failed and didn't return for the following semester. I took a five-year hiatus and didn't think I ever would return to school but that was until I came across Generation Hope and that is what gave me the foothold to get back into school... Generation Hope gave me the encouragement of them letting me know that everything is going to work out...But besides mentoring and encouragement they also provided me with my first laptop for college." – Ariel*

**"And being a single parent like myself that has experienced tremendous trauma and still come out on the other side—we are resilient. We know how to make things happen."  
– Christianna**

- **Recognize student parents' grit and resilience, and value the life experience, perspective, and dedication that they bring to campus and the classroom.** Taking a strengths-based approach to designing interventions that promote parents' success will lead to more diverse, richer campus environments.

*"That sense of being a mom as a negative is out there in the zeitgeist and I think that shifting the perception of what being a mom is into something that's like, oh my gosh, no, no, that is an asset—being a parent is an asset." – Aaliyah*



*"No one is more resourceful than a person who has gone through trauma and has had to pick themselves up. And being a single parent like myself that has experienced tremendous trauma and still come out on the other side—we are resilient. We know how to make things happen."  
– Christianna*

**"Policymakers and higher education administrators should think of me when they're making their policies, put themselves in my shoes."  
– Waukecha**

*"[When student parents and policymakers] can see that 'hey there are other student parents who are succeeding'... [it shines a spotlight on] the positive light of being a student parent...There is so much negativity and stigma of being a teen parent, you know, it used to be looked down upon so much, especially teen moms...But we are shining so much positive light on it and seeing the perseverance and grit of student parents." – Ariel*



- **Finally, create frameworks of support that are informed by student parent perspectives and input.** Reach out to student parents to understand their experiences and their needs, as distinct from those of “traditional” students.

*“Policymakers and higher education administrators should think of me when they’re making their policies, put themselves in my shoes. Without the resources that you are used to, would you [have been] able to be successful?”  
– Waukecha*

*“Listen—that’s the biggest thing—is people need to listen...because you may think you understand and you may have expectations based on your experience, but that doesn’t mean you understand my experience or what my needs are.” – Naomi*

## CONCLUSION

Supporting student parents’ ability to succeed in higher education increases their families’ chances of economic security and social mobility, enhances diversity of thought and experience in the classroom, and empowers contributing, skilled members of the U.S. workforce and society. Yet these students face disproportionate difficulty in accessing college and graduating, in addition to experiencing heightened effects of the ongoing pandemic and economic downturn. Helping student parents who want to reenroll in college do so successfully requires providing support so that they can balance all the variables in their lives and their finances. Thoughtful, proactive guidance from institutions, adequate assistance to cover the costs of college and family, and access to supportive services that are tailored to student parents’ needs as adult learners and caregivers can help maintain that fragile balance and increase their chances of educational attainment. As institutions, states, and national policy leaders work to design systems that promote completion among adult learners and enable communities and families to recover from the instability triggered by COVID-19, ensuring that student parent perspectives, experiences, and strengths are considered will be essential to their success.

Supporting student parents’ ability to succeed in higher education increases their families’ chances of economic security and social mobility, enhances diversity of thought and experience in the classroom, and empowers contributing, skilled members of the U.S. workforce and society.



**APPENDIX TABLE 1. Share of Undergraduate Students Who Left College without a Degree or Certificate within Six Years of Enrollment, by Dependency and Parent Status, 2012-2017**

	All students	Dependent Students	Independent Non-Parents	Student Parents
All	32%	27%	47%	52%
Men	35%	31%	49%	54%
Women	29%	24%	44%	48%
White	29%	24%	45%	52%
Black	43%	38%	52%	58%
Latinx	34%	30%	48%	50%
Asian	18%	16%	39%	n/a
American Indian/Alaska Native	37%	36%	n/a	n/a
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	41%	37%	n/a	n/a
More than one race	33%	30%	50%	43%
Community college	46%	42%	52%	62%
Public four-year	20%	18%	39%	58%
Private nonprofit four-year	15%	13%	46%	44%
For-profit (all)	39%	36%	41%	42%

Note: "n/a" indicates the sample size was too unstable for analysis.

Source: Institute for Women's Policy Research analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2012/17 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:12/17).

**APPENDIX TABLE 2. Share of Student Parents Who Left College without a Degree or Certificate within Six Years of Enrollment, by Gender, 2012-2017**

	All Student Parents	Student Fathers	Student Mothers
All	52%	61%	48%
Single	54%	71%	50%
Married	48%	53%	45%
White	52%	57%	49%
Black	58%	72%	53%
Latinx	50%	66%	45%
Asian	n/a	n/a	n/a
American Indian/Alaska Native	n/a	n/a	n/a
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	n/a	n/a	n/a
More than one race	43%	n/a	49%
Community college	62%	61%	48%
Public four-year	58%	70%	58%
Private nonprofit four-year	44%	64%	55%
For-profit (all)	42%	44%	44%
Student parents with infants	56%	63%	53%
Student parents with children 1-5	52%	61%	48%
Student parents with children 6-9	47%	64%	40%
Student parents with children 10 and older	53%	59%	51%

Note: "n/a" indicates the sample size was too unstable for analysis.

Source: Institute for Women's Policy Research analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2012/17 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:12/17).



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## OUR MISSION | A just future begins with bold ideas.

We win economic equity for all women and eliminate barriers to their full participation in society. As a leading national think tank, we build evidence to shape policies that grow women's power and influence, close inequality gaps, and improve the economic well-being of families.



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Imaginable Futures is a global philanthropic investment firm that believes learning has the power to unlock human potential. With investments across Africa, Latin America, and the United States, we aspire to provide every learner with the opportunity and the tools they need to imagine, and to realize a brighter future.