

Fact Sheet



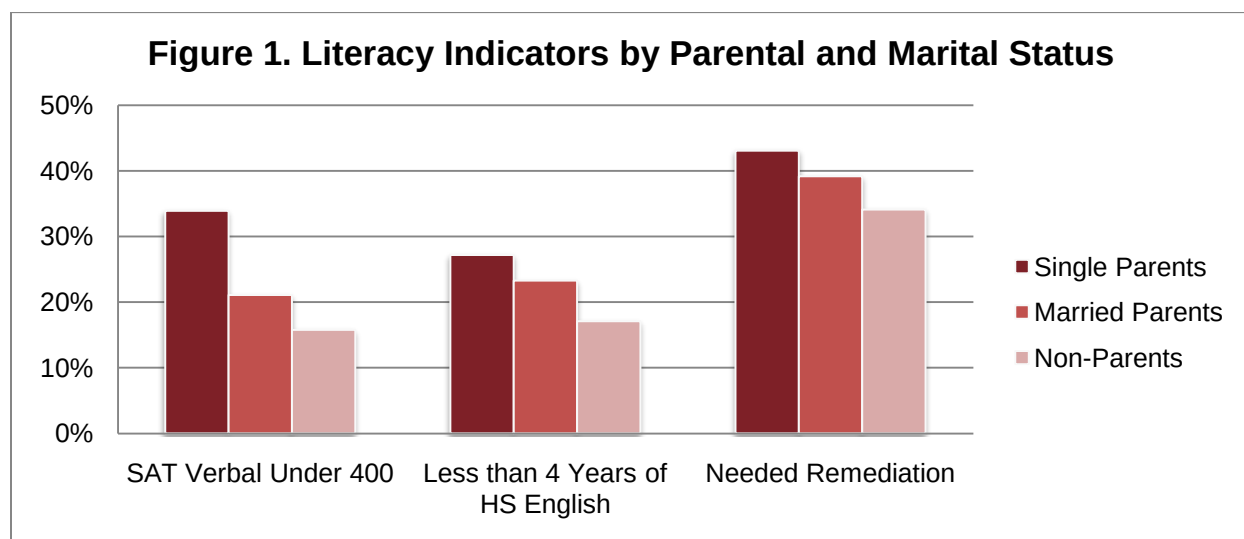
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Student Parents Face Significant Challenges to Postsecondary Success

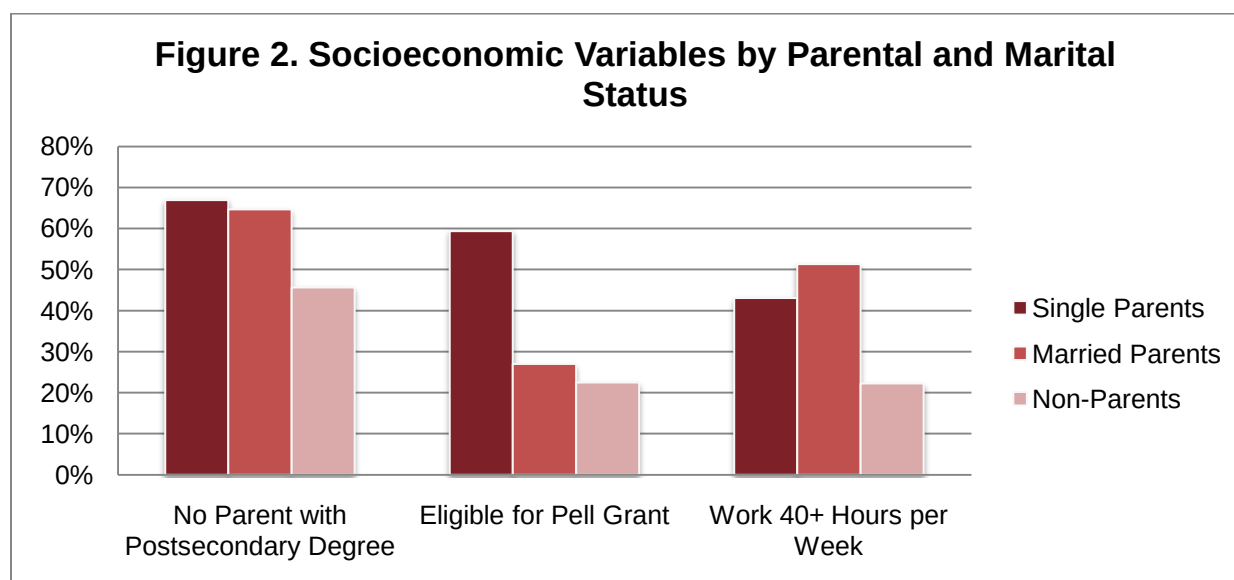
Parents of dependent children now make up almost one in four students pursuing postsecondary education in the United States, as parents seek postsecondary credentials to increase their incomes and improve the status of their families. However, student parents, especially single parents, face significant challenges to success in postsecondary programs.

Barriers to success in postsecondary programs for student parents can be identified in data from the 2008 National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey, administered by the U.S. Department of Education. Indicators show that basic literacy skills of student parents lag behind those of students without children. Upon arriving at postsecondary institutions, student parents are more likely than non-parents to have SAT Verbal scores of less than 400 (or equivalent ACT scores) and to have taken fewer than four years of high school English classes. Once enrolled, student parents are also more likely to take remedial classes than are students without children. These comparisons are true for both single and married student parents, but are even more dramatic for single parents. Thirty-four percent scored less than 400 on the SAT Verbal section (or equivalent on the ACT), more than twice the proportion of students without children (see Figure 1).



Source: IWPR analysis of 2008 undergraduate data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey.

The data suggest that student parents more often face a literacy gap when compared to other students in postsecondary settings. This literacy gap is likely exacerbated by differences in the socioeconomic backgrounds and living situations of student parents. Student parents are more likely to come from a family where no parent has a college degree, are more likely to be eligible for the federal need-based Pell grant program, and are more likely to work full time while pursuing postsecondary education. Single parents are particularly likely to qualify for need-based financial aid—59 percent are eligible for Pell assistance, more than twice the proportion of married parents or students without children. Married parents are somewhat more likely than single parents to be working full-time in addition to pursuing postsecondary education (51 percent compared to 43 percent; see Figure 2).



Source: IWPR analysis of 2008 undergraduate data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey.

Although student parents face many challenges, student parents can and do succeed in completing postsecondary credentials at all levels. Access to academic counseling, financial aid, public assistance, and child care can help student parents obtain postsecondary credentials that place their families on a path to economic self-sufficiency.

This fact sheet was written by Kevin Miller, Ph.D., and was produced in part for the joint IWPR and National Coalition for Literacy event, “Women’s Education and Economic Opportunity: The Role of Literacy.” Funding for this fact sheet and IWPR’s ongoing work on postsecondary success has been provided by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.