

THE STUDENT PARENT EQUITY IMPERATIVE: GUIDANCE FOR THE BIDEN-HARRIS ADMINISTRATION

As the Biden-Harris administration seeks to hasten the country's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, reforming the U.S. higher education system to ensure equitable access and attainment for all adults is more important than ever. Holding a college degree or certificate was already increasingly important for securing living-wage employment.¹ Now, true recovery demands a repair of this system, which was not built for the college students of today—nearly one quarter of whom are raising children of their own.²

Black and Latina mothers in particular, who are likely to be the sole breadwinners in their families, are facing greater employment loss than men and white women as a result of the pandemic. They need supportive, affordable opportunities to gain new skills so they can reenter the job market.

Most student parents are mothers, students of color, adult and working learners, students with low incomes, and first-generation students—characteristics that can overlap to create steep obstacles in their efforts to achieve success.³ COVID-19 has disproportionately increased the caregiving, financial, and emotional burdens on these student parents and their families. For many, this has led them to suspend their educational plans at higher rates than students without caregiving demands.⁴

Black and Latina mothers in particular, who are likely to be the sole breadwinners in their families, are facing greater employment loss than men and white women as a result of the pandemic.⁵ They need supportive, affordable opportunities to gain new skills so they can reenter the job market. Robust

investments in accessible degree and credential pathways that lead to family-sustaining jobs are required for the country to successfully and equitably “build back better.”

The following memorandum serves as a call to the Biden-Harris administration to include parenting students and their families in its policymaking efforts tied to postsecondary education, early care and education access, and social welfare. It provides policy recommendations to prioritize student parents and their families' wellbeing and contribute to the development of sustainable and equitable pathways to educational attainment. The recommendations span four areas: supporting student parents' college access and success, building affordable pathways to college for student parents, expanding caregiving support and child care access for student parents, and increasing basic needs security for student parent families.

THE EQUITY IMPLICATIONS OF STUDENT PARENT SUCCESS

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Student parents represent a critical cross-section of U.S. college students. Nearly four million undergraduates are parents.⁶ Over two million of these students are mothers and 1.7 million are single mothers.⁷ One third of Black college students are raising children and an estimated two in five Black women in college are mothers.⁸ Among Native students, 29 percent of American Indian/Alaska Native and 30 percent of Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students are parents. A significant number of Latinx students are parents as well, with 21 percent of the population having children under the age of 18. Student parent status also intersects with

generational and income status: 60 percent of student parents are first-generation college students and 68 percent live with incomes below 200 percent of federal poverty levels.⁹

The fact that parenting students often have less privileged racial, gender, and socioeconomic status means that, as a result of systemic barriers, they frequently experience greater obstacles to college access, increased rates of departure, and disproportionately low completion rates—all of which can affect family economic security, long-term wealth building, and children's chances of success.¹⁰ A broken child care system, insufficient access to financial and holistic supports, and the realities of parenting while pursuing higher education also pose challenges for students with children, often leading to limited time and energy to devote to education and, for many, substantial student debt.¹¹ Median student parent debt is nearly 2.5 times higher than debt among students without children (\$6,500 compared with \$2,500), with educational debt especially high for single mothers and Black student parents.¹²

For student parents who successfully earn college degrees, however, their investment in college benefits both their families and the broader economy. According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research's analysis of the return on single mothers' investment in higher education, single mothers who earn a bachelor's degree stand to increase their lifetime earnings by roughly \$625,000 above what they would have earned with only a high school diploma.

The U.S. economy stands to gain as well: for example, the cohort of enrolled single mothers during the 2015-16 academic year who are expected to earn a bachelor's degree at current attainment rates will pay nearly \$7 billion dollars more in taxes over their lifetimes than single mothers with just a high school diploma.

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SUPPORTING STUDENT PARENTS' COLLEGE ACCESS AND SUCCESS

Student parents are nearly twice as likely to depart college prior to graduation than students without children, leaving them with some college credit, but no certificate or degree to help them secure a good job or pay off existing debt.¹⁴ Single mothers and Black parents, especially fathers, are particularly likely to suspend enrollment before completing their educational programs.¹⁵

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it even harder for these student parents to enter and persist in college. Findings from the Fall 2020 Lumina-Gallup Student Study show that college students who are caregivers or parents are significantly more likely to have decided to suspend their college enrollment in the last six months than students who are not caregivers or parents (44 percent compared with 31 percent, respectively).¹⁶ Policies and practices that are cognizant of student parents' heightened and unique needs, especially among families of color, and support their ability to enroll and persist in college are essential to promoting their continued access to higher education.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Increase investment in community colleges, tribal and historically Black colleges and universities, and other under-resourced institutions where student parents, students of color, and students with low incomes are more likely to enroll, to improve their capacity to support these students' success.**

These institutions are underfunded compared with other public and private institutions, yet they provide more affordable pathways to degree attainment.¹⁷ Greater funding should go toward making these institutions more affordable for student parents, the majority of whom attend community colleges and public four-year institutions.¹⁸ It should also be directed at providing holistic and family-friendly supportive services to help close equity gaps, especially for student parents of color.

- **Require all Title IV institutions to collect data on students' parent status, report these data annually to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), and provide technical assistance to states and institutions for building data collection mechanisms that include parent status and caregiving-related variables.**

Disaggregated data that reveal characteristics and outcomes of specific student populations are central to racial- and gender equity-focused policy development. Higher education institutions and state higher education systems should collect data on students' parent status and age and number of children and disaggregate these data by gender, race, ethnicity, marital status, and income when measuring student outcomes.¹⁹ In addition, IPEDS data collected on the presence of campus child care centers should be collected at the campus level, to account for institutions with multiple centers, and disaggregated by student eligibility, to shed greater light on the accessibility of existing on-campus child care centers for students with children.

- **Enhance existing student services programs, including TRIO programs, that serve students of color, students with low incomes, and first-generation college students, to support student parent success.**

Upward Bound and student support services often serve students who are caring for dependents. These and other relevant programs should add student parents as a priority population and explicitly acknowledge them in eligibility language. In addition, grantees should provide intentional programming for parenting students, including student-parent focused mentor support, referrals to affordable child care resources, and student-parent friendly tutoring services. The administration should also provide guidance to grantees on enhancing evaluation efforts, including collecting data on students by parent status and developing stronger assessments to determine the effectiveness of TRIO programs serving student parents.²⁰

- **Invest in greater technological support and access to high-quality Internet for student parent families and other students facing technological gaps.**

Technological support and resources are vital to the success of today's college student. Student parent families, especially those living in rural areas or experiencing housing

insecurity or homelessness, will likely need access to remote education beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Broadband access and technology devices (laptops and tablets) are needed to promote educational progress among parenting college students and will also support their children's learning and development

- **Prevent predatory targeting of student parents by for-profit institutions and enhance protections for those currently enrolled.**

Nearly half (45 percent) of all students attending for-profit institutions are parents and 39 percent are single mothers.²¹ For-profit colleges have a history of leading to higher student debt and producing poor labor market outcomes, which can leave student parents with limited or no return on their investment in college.²²

Priorities set forth by the Biden-Harris administration must include efforts to stop for-profit education programs from profiteering off of students by restoring the Borrower's Defense Rule, improving accountability, and providing consumer protections that ensure students are not incentivized to enroll in institutions that are less likely to yield a positive return.

BUILDING AFFORDABLE PATHWAYS TO COLLEGE FOR STUDENT PARENTS

Student parents face substantial financial insecurity that has been exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic and economic crisis. As of 2015-2016, the year of the most recent data available, over half of Black student parents reported living with poverty-level incomes, followed closely by student parents identifying as "more than one race," Native American/Alaska Native student parents, and Latinx student parents.²³ Analysis of 2020 U.S. Census data conducted by the Community College Research Center at Columbia University shows that households facing economic insecurity are approximately three times as likely to cancel educational plans as households with higher incomes since the onset of the pandemic.²⁴ Improving college affordability for student parents is essential to ensuring they are able to continue on their pathways to completion and that their families are able to access the range of benefits that come from successful postsecondary attainment.²⁵

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Strengthen and expand the Pell grant program to help student parents meet heightened financial needs related to educational attainment and providing for their families.**

Double the maximum Pell grant, peg award amounts to inflation, and make Pell grant funds spent on non-educational goods and services that support a student's ability to remain enrolled (e.g., room and board, child care, and transportation) tax-exempt. In addition, access to federal aid should acknowledge that student parents may take longer to complete their education than accepted measures of "on-time" completion, and consider methods for differentiating aid taken on by parents on behalf of their children to enable adult parents to receive assistance for their own degree attainment.

- **Improve communication to students about, and application of, the dependent care allowance so that aid awards better account for the financial demands related to caregiving.**

Require that accurate dependent care expenses be calculated in net price estimates to help student parents better understand their full cost of attendance and to make students aware that an allowance for dependent care expenses is available. Provide guidance to states and institutions in providing clear and readily available information about the dependent care allowance and in facilitating students' petitions to receive it.

- **Establish college promise or "free college" programs that provide students—including parenting, adult, working, and returning students—with tuition-free access to college and holistic supportive services.**

College promise programs should include provisions that expand eligibility for students attending less than full time, students with low incomes, undocumented and DACA students, and returning adult learners. They should follow a first-dollar model, provide support for costs beyond tuition (e.g., child care, transportation costs, and textbook costs), and provide continued support for students for who require additional time to earn their degrees. Programs should also be required to collect and report data on the unique effects that interventions have on student parents who are juggling caregiving and school.

- **Cancel all or a significant portion of student loan debt to help student parents achieve family economic security after investing in their educational attainment.**

Debt cancellation plans that do not cancel all debt should ensure that the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program is strengthened and guaranteed. The Biden-Harris campaign's proposal to cancel educational debt for public college and university students earning less than \$125,000 would benefit student parents—especially single mothers and Black student parents—who carry larger debt loads than most students.²⁶ Debt cancellation would help student parents who started college but did not complete with a degree, and who may be in default, by enabling them to return to college. It would also contribute to narrowing the racial wealth gap and help to create avenues for wealth building that provide intergenerational economic benefits.²⁷

EXPANDING CAREGIVING SUPPORT AND CHILD CARE ACCESS FOR STUDENT PARENTS

Student parents rely on safe, reliable, and affordable child care arrangements to be able to devote time to college and, often, jobs. Evidence strongly suggests that access to affordable and convenient care plays a critical role in student parents' ability to enroll in college and persist to graduation.²⁸ Yet student parents' access to the caregiving support they need to be successful is hampered by larger fault lines in this country's child care system. Working families and those in which parents are pursuing college credentials deserve a dramatic shift in U.S. child care policy and investment, especially in the face of COVID-19.

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The investments made by the American Rescue Plan to expand access to affordable child care for families who have experienced job loss or disruptions related to the COVID-19 pandemic is an important step to repairing widening gaps in the system.²⁹ In addition to significantly increasing funding for the Child Care Development Block Grant and Head Start and Early Head Start to provide all families with the opportunity to access affordable, high-quality care for their children, the Biden-Harris administration must address the need for greater access to affordable and high-quality child care as an integral tool for promoting student parent success and family economic security.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Increase funding for the Child Care Access Means Parents in Schools (CCAMPIS)—the only federal program devoted to helping student parents with low incomes to access affordable child care—and enhance performance measures and reporting.**

Appropriate \$500 million to CCAMPIS—the amount needed to provide child care support to approximately five percent of Pell-eligible student parents of children ages 0-5—and ensure CCAMPIS grants are targeted to institutions that serve high numbers of low-income and historically excluded students, including historically Black colleges and universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-serving institutions, tribal colleges and universities, and community colleges.³⁰ Efforts should also be made to improve student access to affordable evening care, infant care, care at nontraditional hours, and care for school-aged children. Increased investment in CCAMPIS must be paired with improved data collection and reporting mechanisms, including technical assistance to grantees to assist their collection of data.

- **Require states to relax rules for student parent receipt of Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) child care assistance and encourage states to use contracts with campus child care centers to expand the available supply of care for student parent families.**

Removing barriers to low-income student parents' receipt of child care assistance is likely to increase their ability to access postsecondary education and decrease their time to graduation. Time spent in education and training should be counted fully towards activity requirements to reduce student parents' need to work while enrolled. States should reduce or remove enrollment time limits for CCDF receipt, as student parents often take longer to earn degrees than students without caregiving responsibilities, especially when they are required to work to receive assistance. Limitations on parents' pursuit of higher degrees, including bachelor's degrees, should be removed to allow them to seek degrees that are associated with high lifetime earning potential. Finally, states should be encouraged to establish contracts with campus child care centers in order to ensure supply of needed care to eligible student parent families.

- **Invest in and encourage partnerships between Head Start and higher education institutions to provide Head Start services to eligible student parent families, including intentional partnerships with higher education through Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership grants.**

Bridging gaps between the Head Start and postsecondary education systems would increase opportunities to train high-skilled and in-demand early childhood educators; create new connections between colleges and their communities; and promote parents' ability to persist and complete education, their children's chances of success, and their ability to establish economic security.³¹ Providing guidance around opportunities for collaboration between Head Start and college institutions to serve student parent families would enable the development of new partnerships. The administration should also designate new funding for communities with high need for affordable, high-quality care among student parents, in addition to existing Head Start grantees and recipients. In general, efforts to work with higher education to build the supply of a highly skilled early learning workforce, including infant and toddler educators and home-based care providers, could be combined with interventions that expand access to care for student parent families.

- **Appropriate funding to re-establish the Strengthening Working Families Initiative (SWFI) for the development of strategic outreach and support for working student parents.**

In 2016, the Department of Labor invested \$54 million to support public-private partnerships that helped parents make progress toward career advancement by reducing gaps between local workforce development and child care systems. Student parents would benefit from continued investments in this initiative to promote expansion and increase the number of education and training providers across targeted industries partnering with child care programs, particularly those proven to lead to higher-paying careers for women with college credentials.

- **Reauthorize and appropriate at least \$25 million in funding to the Pregnancy Assistance Fund (PAF) grant program for states and tribal nations to improve the outcomes of expectant and parenting families, including pregnant and parenting college students.**

This grant program, created by the Affordable Care Act, enabled states and communities to build robust supports for expectant and parenting teens who were starting or had families of their own. Continuing this funding source will enable past and new grantees to develop intentional interventions to promote pregnant and parenting students' ability to attain a postsecondary education.

INCREASING BASIC NEEDS SECURITY FOR STUDENT PARENT FAMILIES

Increasing evidence demonstrates the role of basic needs security in students' ability to succeed educationally. Food, housing, transportation, and child care, as well as physical and mental health care, are fundamentally connected to student outcomes.³² For students with children, basic needs play a distinct role in their ability to enroll, persist, and graduate. A 2019 survey of nearly 23,000 community college and four-year students by the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice found that 53 percent of parenting students were food insecure in the prior 30 days, 68 percent were housing insecure in the previous year, and 17 percent were homeless in the previous year—rates that exceed those of non-parents.³³ These insecurities have been exacerbated by COVID-19, particularly for Black, Indigenous, and Latina women students, who are often parents and family breadwinners.³⁴ In addition to specific pandemic relief needed to ensure students' well-being and ability to pursue college, efforts to improve access to and success in higher education must include intentional provision of holistic support that helps student parents meet their families' basic needs while enrolled in school.³⁵

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Establish categorical eligibility for public assistance based on Pell-eligibility for student parents and other students with low incomes.**

Public assistance programs including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families; the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program; Women, Infants, and Children; Child Care Development Fund assistance; Head Start; and Section 8 public housing provide essential financial support to parenting students with low incomes. These programs should also count education and training toward activity requirements to lessen students' need to work while enrolled.

- **Establish permanent federal support for emergency assistance programs that prioritize students with children and others with high financial need.**

Students with low incomes, many of whom are parents, are often one small crisis away from having to leave college. Emergency aid programs can help students avoid enrollment

breaks when these crises hit. Student parents would benefit from access to emergency funds specifically dedicated to students with caregiving responsibilities. Federal support of these programs would provide an additional pathway for student parents to access the means to address family resource insecurities or financial emergencies.

- **Partner with states and private-sector entities to provide rent and mortgage subsidies to students with low incomes and student parent families who need short- and long-term housing assistance.**

Many student parents need support with housing through the duration of the pandemic and beyond, especially given limited access to affordable family housing provided by their institutions.³⁶ The administration should explore opportunities to support the construction of affordable family housing on or near college campuses, including establishing or funding public-private partnerships dedicated to increasing the supply of affordable housing for these student families.

- **Build a basic needs infrastructure and implement programming to increase access to nutrition assistance and reduce food insecurity among student parents.**

A significant portion of parenting students need support in securing food for their families. Several states have passed legislation to address issues with food insecurity on campus, and student parents would benefit greatly from federal support in this area.³⁷ The administration should join state leaders in funding meal vouchers and campus food pantries to increase food security for students and families.

- **Develop new federal funding streams devoted to improving access to culturally cognizant mental health services for students with and without children.**³⁸

Experiences of homelessness, domestic violence, addiction, child illness, disability, and mental health issues, among others, are common among students with children, affecting their ability to afford college, their mental health, and their persistence. Mental health services for students should provide support around issues related to self-worth, academic performance, children with special needs, chronic illness, chemical dependency, intimate partner violence, homelessness, intergenerational trauma, and other concerns.

CONCLUSION

Centering the needs and lived realities of college students with children and other students at the margins of our country's higher education system is vital to ensure that all families and communities recover from the global pandemic and build toward a more equitable, prosperous future. Given the opportunity for economic security and children's future success that student parents' college attainment represents, their ability to access and succeed in college has direct implications for their family's wellbeing and for greater social progress. The Biden-Harris administration must work across federal agencies, with states, and with Congress to ensure that student parents and their families have access to opportunities for educational and economic success by making college more affordable, more supportive, and more equitable for students with the greatest need and also the most to gain.



ENDNOTES

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