



STUDENT PARENTS IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: Heightened Need & the Imperative for Strengthened Support

INTRODUCTION

Nearly four million undergraduates, or more than one in five college students, are parents of children under 18.¹ These student parents face—in normal times—disproportionate economic insecurity, difficulty meeting basic needs, and significant time and caregiving demands. Yet, in spite of these challenges, they are also incredibly resilient. Motivated to build a better life for themselves and their children through higher education, student parents excel academically, demonstrate exceptional time management, and are committed parents and caregivers.²

Student parents are now coping with the closing of colleges and universities, rapid relocation from on-campus housing, transitions to remote instruction, potential or realized job losses, and child care and school closures, among other crises, as a result of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. As the effects of the pandemic reverberate throughout U.S. society, student parents' vulnerabilities are rising to new heights, threatening their ability to keep their families healthy and secure on top of maintaining their studies remotely.

To ensure student parents and their children receive adequate support and remain engaged with their educational pathways, communities and policymakers must prioritize these students' and their families' needs as they craft pandemic response and recovery strategies.

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The COVID-19 Pandemic Exacerbates Student Parents' Existing Insecurity

Student parents have little cushion in the event of an economic crisis and are already coping with serious financial need:

- » Over two thirds (68 percent) of student parents live in or near poverty, as do nearly 9 in 10 single mother students.³
- » Even after accounting for all financial aid, scholarships, family support, and income from employment, student parents have a median of \$4,400 in unmet financial need—nearly \$2,000 more than students without children. Single mother students are in even deeper financial straits, with \$5,500 in unmet financial need.
- » According to research from the Hope Center for Community, College, and Justice, 68 percent of students with children reported experiencing housing insecurity in the past year and 17 percent reported having been homeless in that time frame. Over half reported food insecurity (53 percent).⁴

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With unemployment insurance claims skyrocketing to record highs as a result of the pandemic, the unprecedented rise in unemployment will have dramatic effects on student parents' economic well-being:⁵

- » Nearly 60 percent of student parents with low incomes work at least 20 hours per week, with one third of those students working 40 hours or more on top of school.
- » Nearly 20 percent of working student parents earn less than \$10 per hour, and over half (52 percent) earn an hourly wage of between \$10 and \$19.
- » For student parents who work in essential industries, school and child care closures may make it much more difficult or impossible for them to maintain employment.
- » An estimated 766,000 student parents—or over one third (36 percent) of all working student parents—do not have access to paid sick days, including 45 percent of working student mothers.⁶ Without paid sick days, these students are faced with a choice between jeopardizing their health and the health of their family and their ability to provide for their families' basic needs.

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Student parents—especially single mothers and Black student parents—hold significant student debt, increasing their vulnerability in the face of prolonged unemployment:⁷

- » As of 2015-16, among currently enrolled students, student parents held a median of \$6,500 in undergraduate debt—\$4,000 more than students without children.
- » Single mothers and Black student parents could be disproportionately affected by the economic effects of the pandemic, as they borrow more for their undergraduate education than other student parents and students overall: single mothers had taken out a median of \$9,500, and Black student parents a median of \$13,300, in undergraduate loans as of 2015-16.

Centering Student Parents in the Pandemic Response and Recovery

The federal government, states and communities, colleges and universities, service providers, and advocates are working to simultaneously stem the spread of the virus, keep families healthy, and mitigate both immediate and long-term damage to economies, support systems, and family well-being. Ensuring that student parents' unique circumstances inform measures to address the crisis and provide relief is crucial. The following recommendations describe how leaders and communities can center the needs of student parents in the coming months.

- » **Institutions, community-based organizations, and philanthropy must provide enhanced emergency financial assistance to students with children.**

Financial assistance is critical to helping student parent families cope with economic shocks stemming from the effects of the pandemic. Rising unemployment means many of these families are losing crucial income and, because most are already living with high economic insecurity, one lost paycheck may be enough to jeopardize their ability to meet essential needs. Emergency aid programs should be expanded to the extent possible and, importantly, rules that create obstacles to accessing available aid must be removed to ensure all student parents who need help can get it. In addition, institutions must actively work to communicate available assistance opportunities to students and make the application processes as simple and smooth as possible.

- » **Campus child care centers, Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) programs, student services departments, and other student-facing stakeholders should organize the delivery of virtual and physical resources to student parents.**

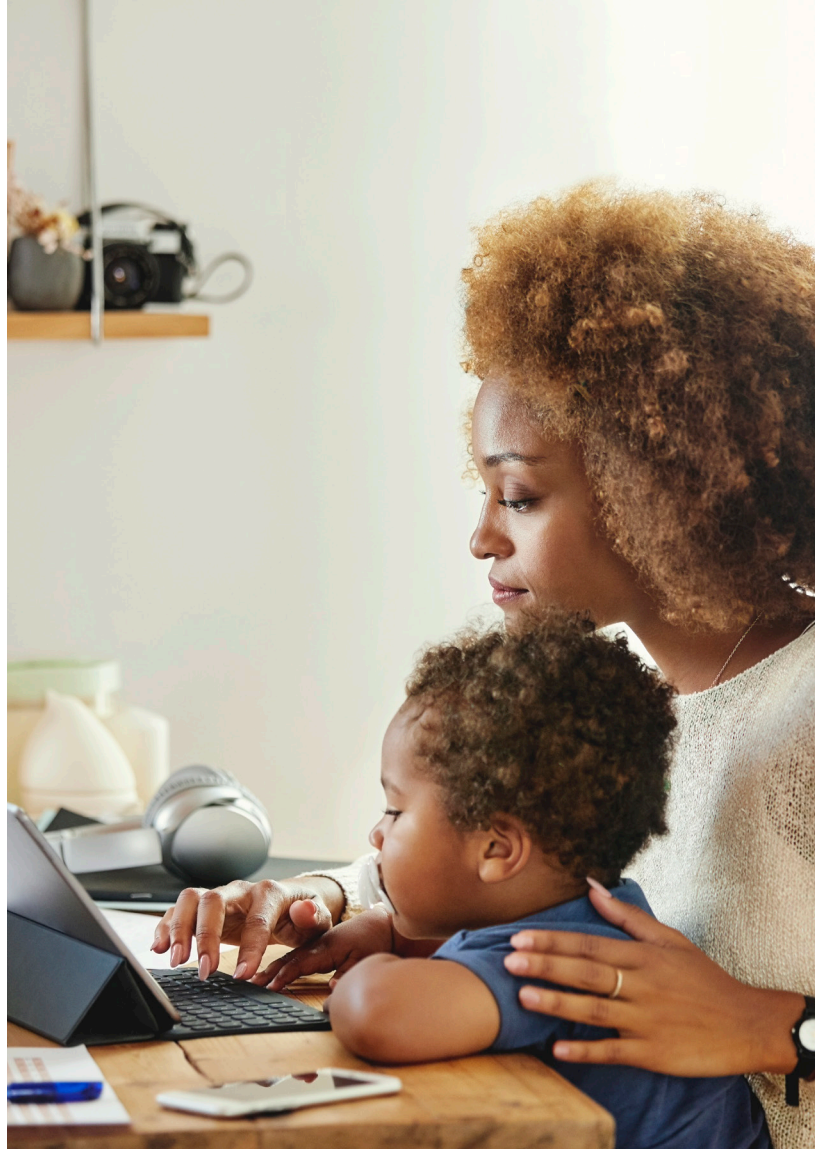
Heightened assistance accessing affordable or free internet, computers, and online educational resources are essential to ensuring student parents, especially those living in rural areas, are able to successfully transition to remote instruction.

Student parents will also need help meeting their family's essential needs. Arrange care packages with diapers and wipes, school supplies, children's toys and books, and educational materials. Collaborate with campus and community food banks and other community service providers, such as the local Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) office, to arrange delivery or pick-up of free groceries, formula, cleaning supplies, and other resources.

To help student parents cope with the psychological effects of the crisis, connect them to counseling services available through the campus or community providers. Provide virtual support sessions and organize group chats with other student parents to facilitate peer support. Creating a safe and compassionate space where student parents feel seen and supported will be important to ensuring they are able and willing to continue their education next term.

- » **Administrators, staff, and faculty should provide enhanced flexibility to students to accommodate the challenges they face as a result of the pandemic.**

School and child care closures are exacerbating student parents' care needs, particularly for the 1.7 million students who are single mothers.⁸ Remote instruction does not alleviate the need for child care. In addition, parents who have lost, or fear that they will lose, their jobs are facing enhanced stress, both psychologically and financially. Student parents need enhanced flexibility around coursework deadlines, remote instruction attendance, and mandatory testing or project completion requirements to cope with crises that have arisen due to social distancing and shelter in place orders.



- » **Student parents should not be penalized for poor academic performance during the COVID-19 crisis, including their ability to access the maximum amount of financial aid for which they would be eligible in the fall term.**

Students whose academic performance falters during or immediately after the global pandemic should not be held to satisfactory academic performance standards when assessing their eligibility for financial aid. In addition, scholarships, grants, and other forms of aid must not be threatened now or for the next academic term as a result of changes in students' academic performance. Certainty in their financial aid awards will be critical to student parents' calculations of whether they can afford to continue with their educational programs moving forward.

The COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented in its disruption to the lives and well-being of every U.S. family, to the economy, and to the global community more broadly. Thinking strategically about responses to this crisis requires intentional support for the most vulnerable, including low-income student parent families, to ensure their ability to recover once the pandemic ends.



ENDNOTES

¹ Unless otherwise noted, data presented in this fact sheet come from: Institute for Women’s Policy Research. 2020. Institute for Women’s Policy Research analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015-16 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:16).

² Institute for Women’s Policy Research and Ascend at the Aspen Institute. 2019. “Parents in College: By the Numbers.” Fact Sheet, IWPR #C481. Washington, DC: Institute for Women’s Policy Research and Ascend at the Aspen Institute. <<https://iwpr.org/publications/parents-college-numbers/>> (accessed March 25, 2020).

³ Near poverty is defined here as between 100-199 percent of the Federal Poverty Line.

⁴ Christine Baker-Smith, Vanessa Coca, Sara Goldrick-Rab, Elizabeth Looker, Brianna Richardson, and Tiffani Williams. 2020. *#RealCollege 2020: Five Years of Evidence on Campus Basic Needs Insecurity*. Philadelphia, PA: Hope Center for Community, College, and Justice. <https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2019_RealCollege_Survey_Report.pdf> (accessed on March 24, 2020).

⁵ U.S. Department of Labor. 2020. *Unemployment Insurance Weekly Claims*. <<https://www.dol.gov/ui/data.pdf>> (accessed March 26, 2020).

⁶ Institute for Women’s Policy Research analysis of U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics American Time Use Survey and Leave Module, 2017-2018. The share of working student fathers without paid sick days is not reported because the sample size is unsustainable.

⁷ Institute for Women’s Policy Research and Ascend at the Aspen Institute. 2019. “Parents in College: By the Numbers.”

⁸ Lindsey Reichlin Cruse, Jessica Milli, Susana Contreras-Mendez, Tessa Holtzman, and Barbara Gault. 2019. “Investing in Single Mothers’ Higher Education: National and State Estimates of the Costs and Benefits of Single Mothers’ Educational Attainment to Individuals, Families, and Society.” Briefing Paper, IWPR #R600. Washington, DC: Institute for Women’s Policy Research. <<https://iwpr.org/publications/investing-in-single-mothers-higher-education-national-state-costs-benefits/>> (accessed March 25, 2020).

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