

Advancing Equity in Attainment for Black Single Mothers in College

Understanding Their Needs
and Supporting Their Success



ABOUT THIS REPORT

As part of its broader Student Parent Success Initiative, IWPR conducted original research focusing specifically on Black single mother students. This report summarizes findings from 25 interviews IWPR conducted with Black single mother community college students, consisting of both students who were enrolled at the time of the interview and those who had been enrolled in the prior five years. These interviews provide insight into how college settings promote or inhibit the success of Black single mother community college students, how Black single mother students engage with institutional resources, which of these resources they find beneficial, and how institutional resources can better serve their needs.

ABOUT IWPR

The Institute for Women's Policy Research strives to win economic equity for all women and eliminate barriers to their full participation in society. As a leading national think tank, IWPR builds 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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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to the 25 women who shared their experiences as Black single mother students with us. Each one of them contributed to the successful completion of this project. We would also like to thank the following IWPR staff members: Nina Besser Doorley for providing feedback on policy recommendations; Robyn Watson Ellerbe, PhD, for her inputs, and Emme Rogers, Cristy Mendoza, and Miranda Peterson for their research assistance. We also thank our advisory board members, Dr. Stephanie Akunvabey (Pace University) and Dr. Renee Ryberg (Child Trends), for providing feedback on earlier versions of this publication. In addition, we thank our advisory board members, Dr. Lori Patton Davis (The Ohio State University), Ra'Chelle M. Dennis (Martha's Table), Chastity Lord (Jeremiah Program), Kelvin Robinson (Mary Elizabeth House), and Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher (University of Pittsburgh), for their feedback on the report's findings and framing.

This report was made possible with the support of the ECMC Foundation.

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Executive Summary

As part of its broader Student Parent Success Initiative, IWPR conducted original research focusing specifically on Black single mother students. This report summarizes findings from 25 interviews IWPR conducted with Black single mother community college students, consisting of both students who were enrolled at the time of the interview and those who had been enrolled in the prior five years. These interviews provide insight into how college settings promote or inhibit the success of Black single mother community college students, how Black single mother students engage with institutional resources, which of these resources they find beneficial, and how institutional resources can better serve their needs.

Key Findings

- There is a resounding need for affordable and accessible child care. But even when it is available during regular work and school hours, Black single mother students struggle with finding it when needed at other necessary times (e.g., those who take online classes may be required to take an in-person test, clinicals that start at an early hour or finish at an evening hour, daycare/school closures, etc.)
- Institutional support, and supportive faculty and staff in particular, is key to Black single mother students' success and is essential for them to thrive academically and personally.
- Black single mothers want to present themselves as confident in their ability to overcome challenges and emphasize self-sufficiency as they feel consistent pressure to be superhuman.
- Black single mothers seek social, emotional, and mental health support. For them, the mental and emotional toll of attaining a college degree is compounded by the structural inequities and microaggressions they often experience due to their intersectional identities, including gender, race, and parenting status.
- The impact of financial issues is far-reaching for Black single mothers as financial issues make it difficult for them to stay enrolled and complete their education.

The report concludes with our recommendations for tangible ways that institutions and federal and state policymakers can address Black single mother students' needs and, therefore, support their educational attainment.

Introduction

While Black women overall have high college enrollment rates, IWPR's analysis of the 2017 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS) data shows that over two-thirds of Black single mother students did not earn a degree or certificate within six years of enrolling in college (National Center for Education Statistics 2017). Previous IWPR research documented some of the barriers to degree attainment for Black single mothers, including lack of access to quality and affordable child care and a high student debt burden. Attaining postsecondary education and college credentials may provide a pathway to economic mobility for Black single mother students who often have significant needs but limited financial resources (Turner and White 2023). Unfortunately, Black single mothers, like many other student parents, have been largely absent in policy conversations on college completion and institutional practices supporting student success.

Approximately one-third (30 percent) of undergraduate students who are single mothers are Black and over two-thirds (69.5 percent) of Black single mother students are first-generation (National Center for Education Statistics 2020). First-generation college students tend to face increased financial pressures since they are more likely than other college students to come from low-income families, are more likely to be students of color, and tend to be less prepared to navigate the college system than other students (Engle and Tinto 2008; National Center for Education Statistics 2020). These factors, in tandem with its affordability, perceived flexibility, and/or a lack of access to information on broader college options, may contribute to Black single mother students' likelihood of attending community college (Turner and White 2023; Patton, Copridge, and Sharp 2022).

This report summarizes findings from 25 interviews IWPR conducted with Black single mother community college students, consisting of both students who were enrolled at the time of the interview and those who had been enrolled in the prior five years. Researchers at IWPR conducted



one-hour interviews in June and July of 2023 via Zoom (see Table 1 for an overview of participant demographics). These interviews provide insight into how college settings promote or inhibit the success of Black single mother community college students, how they engage with institutional resources, which of these resources they find beneficial, and how institutional resources can better serve their needs. At the conclusion of this report, we provide policy recommendations on how colleges can better support Black single mothers' postsecondary educational attainment.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Sample Size (N)	Age	Number of children	Regions represented
25	Age range: 19–49 Average age: 30	Range of number of children: 1–4 Average number of children: 2	Northeast Southeast Midwest West



Black Single Mother Students Need Child Care That Meets Their Unique Needs

The Black single mother students we interviewed reported a resounding need for on-campus child care and child care assistance. However, their child care needs are nuanced. While the main issues they experience with child care are lack of accessibility and affordability, even when it is available during regular work and school hours, Black single mother students struggle with finding it when needed at other necessary times (e.g., those who take online classes may be required to take an in-person test, clinicals that start at an early hour or finish at an evening hour, daycare/school closures, etc.).

"What could colleges do? Wish they had [daycare], that would be awesome. Child care. Like free [daycare] while you're in school or something, while you're in class or something like that. If I would set my classes back-to-back, then I have my son there and I could check in on him from time to time while I'm in class and he's right there. Because I breastfed for 18 months, and that's the time that I was in school when I was getting my associate. So that would've been wonderful to have him there instead of waiting like, 'Okay, when is class over? I got to go pump, I got to run home.' "

On-campus centers that offer drop-in child care create flexibility for student parents to bring their children with them to campus and attend classes without having their children with them in class. Making campus child care free or subsidized for student parents would lift some of the financial strain that they face, allowing them to focus more on their coursework.

"I didn't have a babysitter for my daughter, and I had to take a really important test . . . so, I had to bring her along. I was like, 'Well, can she come in and maybe sit in the back or sit in a separate room?' They were like, 'No. Unfortunately, it's school policy that children aren't allowed in the class' . . . and so I wasn't able to take the test. Luckily, I was able to reschedule it after I reached out to the dean. But, just in that moment, it was really stressful because the babysitter was such a last-minute thing. I didn't have any and I needed to take this test."

Although student parents comprise a significant portion of the college student population, most campuses are not child-friendly, meaning student parents must organize their class schedules around times when they have child care or when they are not working. Some colleges, such as Howard Community College in Maryland, have begun making their campuses more accessible to student parents by creating a "family-friendly study space" in the campus library where children can play while their parents study (Flaherty 2023).

Institutional Support Is Key to Black Single Mother Students' Success

Faculty and Staff Support Helps Black Single Mother Students Thrive

Many participants shared positive experiences with their schools and provided suggestions for how their institutions can further support them. Several mentioned their appreciation that their colleges had an individualized approach in that staff members reached out to get to know them personally. Participants frequently spoke about how much they appreciated having understanding, supportive faculty members, which is essential to cultivating a sense of inclusion for student parents (Kensinger and Minnick 2017). Many mentioned they felt comfortable approaching their instructors when they needed academic support or accommodations.

"My first semester, my son was sick, but my teachers worked with me to get my assignments submitted and everything. I know they have policies to follow, but they were willing to work with me whenever I had a situation going on."

"One positive experience is my instructors were encouraging. They were so dead set on wanting me to succeed, giving me such praise, such encouragement. If I did need help, they were there just to [say], 'Hey we are still going to just show you this.' "

It is important to understand that, at times, academic success may not be student parents' foremost priority. Institutions should strive to cultivate a culture of empathy and inclusivity within the academic community. One participant shared her negative experiences in a situation when she needed understanding and empathy the most.

"I would say just the teachers not understanding you sometimes, as in you've got to be in class. You can't miss a class, or you'll be kicked out, withdrawn, whatever. They don't understand that you have a kid. I will share the experience where [my son] had a tonsil removed, he needed a tonsil removal, and they scheduled me for tonsil removal. And they told me that I would need to be home with him for two weeks for him to recover, for me to take care of him. Most of my teachers were like 'Okay, just let me know, and we can schedule something,' and the science teacher was like, 'Well, we need paperwork, we need this.' Okay, I know you need paperwork, but they thought I was lying, and I was like 'Yo, I have a son. I am not going to lie about surgery or anything like that.' And then, some teachers were like, 'Oh, well, I am going to send you work.' I am trying to take care of my son the best that I can, and you are stressing me out with work. I know this is college and stuff, but you have got to understand. I have a kid, too. Put yourself in my shoes."

Institutional Support Services That Are Tailored to Black Single Mother Students' Needs Help Them Juggle Their Work, School, and Family Responsibilities

When asked about services that participants found useful, most mentioned group study or tutoring. They shared how tutoring provided them with valuable support to overcome the challenges they faced in balancing their academic and parenting responsibilities.

"I use tutoring services. When I was on the verge of dropping out of college my first time, I didn't want to drop out mid-semester, so I used my tutors to help me on the days that I wasn't available to go to school or wasn't able to make it to class to be able to help me and support me with the work that I missed, because I know that I wasn't learning at the same pace as my other classmates, but I didn't want my GPA to drop any lower, which would've made me ineligible again for my financial aid. So, I use them."

"With these instructors . . . if you need tutoring or anything, you just email them and you can set up a time that is good for both of you, and it would be like a one-on-one session."

Participants also found online tutoring and frequent check-ins by an assigned staff member helpful. In general, when it comes to tutoring and other academic support services, flexibility in scheduling and accessibility for student parents is important.

"Some of the teachers had offered after-hours tutoring, which was very helpful because some of the classes weren't easy. I did like after-hours tutoring, especially with not being on campus all the time. [Since it was a] Zoom meeting, they were able to set certain times with [students] to do the tutoring. I like that."

The availability of after-hours tutoring allows students to access tutoring virtually from wherever they are and allows the instructors to schedule times around student parents' schedules. Providing this kind of flexibility helps them stay enrolled while also managing their family and work responsibilities, which is key to their ability to make consistent progress toward their educational goals.

While several participants mentioned taking advantage of tutoring services, fewer had done so with career counseling services. Most participants mentioned that they had heard of career counseling services but emphasized that they were not able to utilize them. In some cases, this was because they were already in an employer-sponsored career training program. Many, however, were unable to utilize career services because of time limitations. Nonetheless, one mother described how career services helped her:

"Career services was a very huge benefit. From the time I enrolled in school, they were already prepping me for making sure my resume was tailored perfectly to what I was going to school for, including experiences. So career services also provided a great deal of help in getting on major job websites, getting a social network together, so I would have resources to reach out if I wanted to work at a certain job. They were very beneficial, and they still are."

When asked what their institutions could do to provide more support for them as student parents, participants suggested activities for students with children (particularly for single parents) or activities for older student parents, assistance with transportation such as monthly bus passes or a bus service, housing for student mothers, and greater flexibility in course offerings, including more online or nighttime courses. This suggestion echoes our finding that Black single mother students need services tailored to single parent students.

"I feel like they should have more activities for people that are single parents, or just parents in general. They do a lot for the kids that aren't parents. They do a lot of back-to-school stuff and programs, but because I am a parent, you really don't hear about it too much . . ."

"I do feel like, being a Black single mother, some of the challenges, I know at my school, they only have daytime programs. So, I feel like more nighttime programs could be incorporated into these schools or more nighttime classes or whatever, more options should be available for people . . ."

"Additional support services . . . maybe something like a school bus. You sign up for it, we'll pick you up and take you to school and bring you back home. I think that should be considered . . ."

Institutions should promote policies and implement measures that contribute to a more inclusive and supportive environment for student parents to enhance their academic success and well-being.

Black Single Mother Students Want to Show Up Confident in Their Ability to Overcome Their Challenges and Emphasize Self-Sufficiency

Most participants wanted to present themselves as confident and self-sufficient. They also described the consistent pressure they felt to be superhuman. This aligns with the Strong Black Woman Schema (SBWS), described in the literature as unrealistic expectations placed on Black women to show strength, engage in caretaking, and minimize their emotions (Castelin and White 2022). It was evident that interview participants had high expectations of themselves. While they expressed the need for more support, they also emphasized the pressure they felt to be strong and overcome the challenges they face by themselves.

"[There's] just this overwhelming expectation to achieve or be perfect . . . with Black women in general. But to be a Black single mother, it's like you have to be able to do everything on your own and not ask for help and be strong and be superwoman. So that's how I felt throughout my life and especially while I tried to attend school. I was like, 'Oh my God.' I felt like a failure because I wasn't able to do those things."

"You have to endure a lot being a single Black mother . . . I just feel like you just have to have a certain amount of strength to just maintain it, there'll be so many times where you just feel like giving up, but you don't have the luxury of doing that, not when you have kids."



The high expectations Black women often have of themselves are based on stereotypes about them having superhuman strength and misperceptions about Black people generally having a high tolerance for pain (Cousin, Johnson-Mallard, and Booker 2022; Jefferies 2020). Such stereotypes may contribute to Black women being silent about their pain. In fact, one of the outcomes of the internalization of SBWS is self-silencing (Abrams, Hill, and Maxwell 2018).



"There's so much [stigma] in being a Black single mother. A lot of people say, 'Oh, we're bitter,' or 'You can't keep a guy,' or anything like that. And sometimes even with being a Black single mom, we protect our children from a lot of things that are going on in this world today. So, it . . . forces us to be [stronger] than what we are when we have the father in the picture. So, it's just we have more things to work on. We have to take care of a kid by [ourselves]. It's just a lot."

Black women's internalization of SBWS may also mean they are less likely to ask for help or resources when they need them.

"A lot of single mothers, we put on a strong face, and we smile through it all. And behind closed doors, we have the world on our shoulders. And I think the world wants us . . . well, not really the world, but society wants us to be strong. But it's a such thing as too strong. And I think that because we have that perception in our mind, whether we don't ask for resources or we don't ask for assistance or we just think that we could just get it done by [ourselves], it's not really a lot of opportunities or resources that are offered to us . . . and I have been to many different community colleges and I can't find really one thing that stuck out to me that's like, 'This is for me. This is for a single Black mother.' Because there isn't."

Black Single Mother Students Seek Mental, Emotional, and Social Support

The unique intersectional experience of being a Black single mother student can be mentally and emotionally taxing (Commodore, Baker, and Arroyo 2018). Feelings of isolation within traditional college systems are common among student parents in general (Generation Hope 2020), and single mother students may experience even greater adverse mental health outcomes (Contreras-Mendez and Reichlin Cruse 2021; Mohan 2022).

For Black single mother students, the mental and emotional toll of attaining a college degree may be compounded by the structural inequities and microaggressions they often experience due to their intersectional identities, including gender, race, and parenting status. Black women undergraduates on predominantly White campuses tend to be both *hypervisible*, in that they are targets of gendered racial microaggressions, and *invisible*, in that they are overlooked, and their experiences are often invalidated (Newton 2022). Additionally, stereotypes about Black single mothers, such as the “welfare queen” or “baby mama” can shape how they see themselves and how others treat them, which can take a toll on their mental and emotional health (Newton 2022; Turner 2022).

Our interview participants shared their own mental and emotional struggles as they juggle their school work and other responsibilities. Several participants mentioned experiencing depression or anxiety. Unfortunately, most colleges lack the infrastructure to provide adequate mental health support to students, especially those who are parents (Kensinger and Minnick 2017). This is especially true for community colleges, which don’t have the same resources and funding as four-year institutions (Geary 2022). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health issues among college students have been on the rise, and college administrators have had to think creatively about how to meet a rising need for mental health care on campus (Abrams 2022). Some participants mentioned receiving mental and emotional support from their instructors and other campus staff members.

“This program has just been great. If there’s any issue or anything, then I could just email my instructor and talk to them about it. Last semester, it was really hard for me. . . . I was so depressed . . . because I had lost my daughter. And the instructors were there, they brought in a counselor, she talked to me and just gave me tips and pointers on how I could go about dealing with my depression at the time. And they’re just always there. They have an open-door policy, and they are there for whatever needs you may have, whether it be counseling or finding ways to better help you study, because I have had to call on them about that, too, the time management. I love my instructors. They’re great.”

Institutional support is crucial for Black single mother students. Receiving—or not receiving—adequate support from faculty and staff members can make or break students' college experiences. Social and emotional support, especially, are important protective factors for student mothers (Kensinger and Minnick 2017). Based on what our participants mentioned, for Black single mother students, forming relationships with other students who are like them can provide key social and emotional support and can help them develop a sense of belonging. As one mother described, "It takes a village."

"The weight of the world is always on my shoulders. I'm not afraid to be vulnerable, and I'm not afraid to let someone know I need help. Whether I get it or not. Those who understand know it's tough for a Black woman, period, to do things in life by herself. I was just talking to a good friend of mine, she has three kids, so it's tough. But I'm proud of her because she has three and I'm struggling with one. So, it takes a village. So, amongst the group of other friends that I have, we stick together. We have a sister group. We all struggle together. If I get food stamps and she doesn't, I assist. You know?"

As Black single mother students bear the mental and emotional toll of raising children alone, finding a "village" is important for their overall well-being.

Many participants also relied on family members, particularly their mothers, for social and emotional support. Some referenced religion (i.e., their relationship with God or fellow church members) as key to their social and emotional well-being. These findings mirror previous research that illustrates that religion is an important protective factor for Black women (Abrams et al. 2014). Other participants mentioned the need for a support group for single mothers on their campuses.

"I feel like it's really simple. Even if they had . . . a support group for single—it doesn't even have to be Black mothers, just single mothers, period—a support group. To me, that's a thought, like, I would've been grateful with just being among other people that are like me, so we can share our struggles and how we can cope and get through it. I think . . . more mental awareness days, more financial support. And it really doesn't matter what the circumstances are, just acknowledging that it's hard being a single mother. It's hard being a single mother and going to school. And I know most people say, 'Well, that's something that you signed up to do,' but that doesn't negate from [the fact that] it affects us mentally, physically, personally, and emotionally."

Our participants' stories underscore the importance of institutions taking a holistic approach to student parent support that addresses the main areas of their well-being, including social, emotional, and mental health, financial needs, and child care. This requires seeing student parents as people with multi-dimensional lives. Providing holistic institutional support for student parents' well-being supports their overall sense of belonging (Crumb 2021).

Financial Issues Make It Difficult for Black Single Mother Students to Complete Their Education

Previous research identified a lack of financial resources as the main barrier for student mothers in pursuit of their educational goals (Kensinger and Minnick 2017). An IWPR report revealed that student parents were more likely to have student debt than non-parents (73 percent and 48 percent, respectively). The report also showed racial inequities in borrowing patterns, with Black single mothers and fathers being more likely to take out loans than other student parents (Dundar, Tighe, and Turner 2023).

Nearly all Black single mothers interviewed by IWPR reported experiencing financial difficulties at some point during their college journey.

"I'll be paying student loans for a long time because of financial aid. How expensive classes are in order for you to get your degree. It's kind of like they don't want you to get a degree. They want you to look at the price and be like, 'Do you really want to do this?' And it's like at the end of the day, I am paying for what I want to do because there isn't a big support system, especially if you don't come from a wealthy family. If you don't come from a family that's financially capable of taking care of your educational expenses, it kind of leaves you with just a little bit of space for you to try to actually make something work, which is why a lot of people are going to school and working, so it's hard."

While college affordability and student debt issues are not limited to student parents, the impact of financial issues was far-reaching for Black single mothers, as shared by study participants.

"It was hard trying to work and go to school. People tell you, as family and friends, they're going to help you, but that's not always true. So, I had to go in the system to have food stamps and Section 8 and Medicaid and I worked so hard not to be this person, but it's not being that person. It's surviving on everyday life to make sure my kids have what they needed to have."

Financial insecurity also meant housing insecurity or instability for Black single mothers. Most participants emphasized the importance of being able to provide housing for their families and ensuring a safe and stable home for their children. However, a few reported receiving housing assistance such as vouchers, Section 8, or on-campus housing.



Many participants shared housing with mothers, aunts, uncles, and other family members to afford the cost. This is not surprising considering that Black, Asian, and Hispanic Americans are more likely than White Americans to live in multi-generational households (Cohn et al. 2022). Not only can these arrangements provide a means of financial support (as the quote below illustrates), but they may also help bolster family ties and mental, emotional, and social well-being (Generations United 2021).

"I am living rent-free at my grandmother's house until I get on my feet. I moved here in January because the cost of living went up. I am like, 'How do you go up \$400 in the middle of my lease?' I didn't understand that. You know? And I had been there, that was going on my second year. It got tough."

Some Black single mothers interviewed by IWPR shared their struggle to afford necessities, such as food or gas money, which highlights the need to have immediate access to resources that can help with these necessities.

"I just think that if there were just more. . . . Even if they had a voucher sometimes where you can go somewhere like a food bank, because when the money's tight sometimes you find yourself in a position where you've got to have gas money to get to class, gas cards, just anything that would help take a little bit of pressure off because it's a lot of pressure trying to juggle everything."

Participants mentioned financial aid (particularly the Pell Grant and scholarships), tuition assistance through apprenticeship programs, and pledges to work for a particular organization (e.g., a hospital) upon graduation being particularly helpful.

"Now if I didn't get the assistance, then I probably wouldn't be able to foot the bill myself. But with the assistance, then it makes it more reasonable . . . easier for me [than] to just have to be paying out of pocket and still trying to obtain a degree as a single parent. And then still have all the other obligations. So, it helps out a lot."

"Prior to me being selected for the [apprenticeship program], I was paying for it out of pocket because I had exhausted my financial aid. So yeah, I was just working my tailbone off to pay for my classes. But that was just a sacrifice that I was willing to make. But I did get selected and took the apprenticeship program, so they paid for everything. Once you've covered the basics that you need in order to get in, if you got selected, then they did cover the cost of tuition."

"This program that I am in now. . . They have a scholarship thing going on where they basically pay for everything. All you have to do is be successful in school and commit to a three-year job. . . So that kind of helped out. I didn't really have to pay for school this year."

While a few participants mentioned financial support from family and friends, for many, it was not an option.

"[I received] financial aid. I also had family members who were giving me money. I didn't even ask for it, but they just wanted to because they were so proud of me, So the financial aid, that was a big thing. And family who was financially helping me, that was a big thing."

"[I'm] at a homeless shelter here, pursuing my education. I was living with my aunt before this, but she was not very supportive and stuff. I don't really have a good support system or family support system, but my grandpa and my aunt live here. My uncle, too, and my grandma. But my mom and my sisters are in [in a different state]."

Nearly every participant mentioned having to stop pursuing their education at one point when describing their educational journey. In fact, multiple stop-outs (withdrawing from enrollment for some period and returning later) emerged as a common occurrence. Some participants mentioned stopping their education due to financial issues and limited resources.

"So, I originally started when I was 18. After I graduated high school, I went to a four-year college. . . I did about a year there. I ended up having my daughter. Once I had my daughter, I just didn't have the time or the money or the resources . . . to go back to school . . . so I just switched from pursuing school to just pursuing motherhood. And then I just was doing that for a couple of years. And then I decided that I wanted to go back to school, so I attended a community college. Not the one I graduated from. I attended a community college, and I did that for about a year. It just became so overwhelming because, at the time, I was in a city by myself. It was just me and my daughter. I was working full time, and I just couldn't keep up with the school load and then work and then having to take care of her. And so, unfortunately, I had to stop as well. . . The whole journey has been stressful because I really felt like I didn't have a support system, whether that was with family or friends. Just even having a babysitter to be able to go to work or to go to school or do things like that. So, I really felt because of that my education was put on hold a really long time."

The above quote illustrates the impact that not having a strong support system can have on a single mother student's ability to achieve her educational goals.

Despite the challenge of being a student while also caring for children and working, participants emphasized the importance of perseverance and determination in reaching their goals and setting an example for their children.

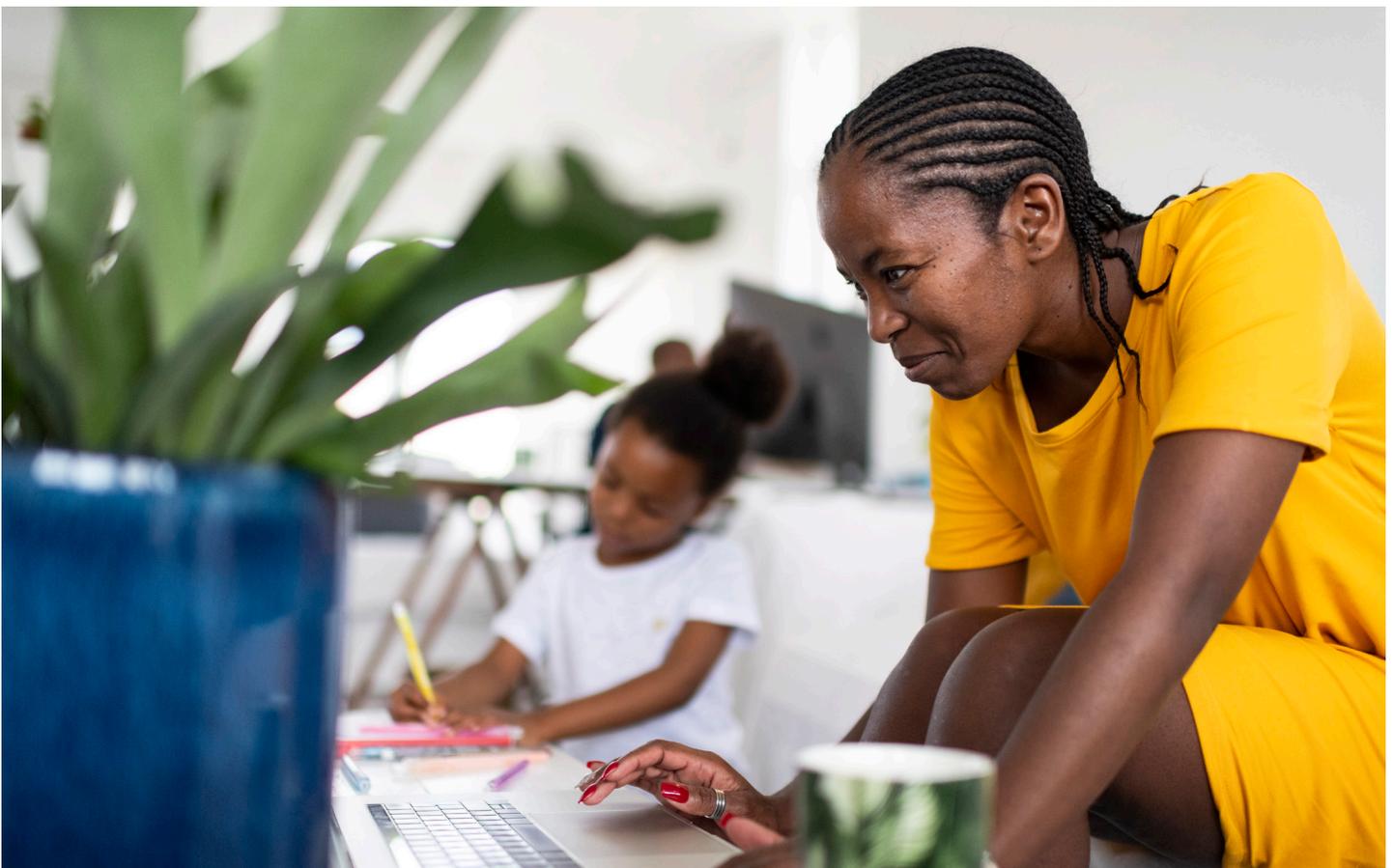
"I want to go to school because I want to set an example for my daughter because school is important, and I pretty much will be working a nine-to-five if I don't have my degree. However, my current nine-to-five is paying my bills so I can be a provider for my daughter. So, just finding a balance, and I just have to come up with a real strategic plan and a plan that's realistic so I can accomplish both. I just know that I cannot stop working to go to school full-time because I won't be able to provide for my children."

"The biggest challenge I faced . . . was trying to juggle parenting and schoolwork. Trying to be a good mom and trying to be a good student was a battle because like I said, that's two jobs—going to school and being a parent is two jobs, and then actually having a job too, so you've really got three jobs. Doing that was a challenge. . . I had plenty of times where I just wanted to say, 'Forget this. Maybe this is not for me. I'm going to just have to be the typical person, just drop out of college and just go get a job.' But I knew that I'm more than that because I've always been above average, I've always been smart, I've always been able to achieve. So, I knew for a fact that wasn't the life for me, just giving up and just going to work, I can do it, I knew I could do it..."

Conclusion

IWPR's interviews with 25 Black single mother community college students show that, although they want to show up confident in their ability to overcome any challenges they face, they have unique needs that policymakers and institutions must address for them to achieve educational equity. Affordable child care that they can access around their work and school schedules (e.g., drop-in or flexible on-campus child care) emerged from the interview data as chief among these students' needs. Institutional support that centers student parents' (especially single parents) needs is also crucial to Black single mother students' success. The types of institutional support interview participants mentioned include after-hours virtual tutoring, designated on-campus activities for student parents, flexible course offerings, and subsidized on-campus housing.

Another theme that emerged from the interview data was the need for providing mental, emotional, and social support for Black single mother students. As student parents—especially Black single mother students—often report feeling marginalized on college campuses, this type of support is essential to their overall well-being and inclusion in the larger campus community (Contreras-Mendez and Reichlin Cruse 2021; Commodore, Baker, and Arroyo 2018; Crumb 2021). Finally, Black single mother students expressed their need for financial support to help them make ends meet in the short term. Having limited access to financial resources affects their ability to stay enrolled in college.



Policy Recommendations

The following are our recommendations for tangible ways that institutions and policymakers can address Black single mother students' needs and therefore, support their educational attainment. While all interview participants attended a community college, several shared their experiences as student mothers at other types of institutions. Hence, the policy recommendations we offer are applicable to postsecondary institutions in general.

State and Federal Policy

Support increased access to affordable, accessible child care for all student parents, including on-campus child care.

- **Fully fund (or increase funding for) on-campus child care through the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) Program.** In October 2023, the Biden-Harris administration announced it would award \$13 million in grant funding to 34 postsecondary institutions to support or help them establish child care programs on their campuses through the CCAMPIS program (US Department of Education 2023). Colleges can use this funding to create programs on their campus, hire child care workers, increase salaries for employees, and provide child care subsidies to low-income student parents.
- **States should work with colleges to help low-income students access child care through the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) block grant,** federal funding that helps states, territories, or tribes subsidize child care for low-income families (Child Care Aware of America 2024). States could use their CCDF funding in support of student parents by funding on-campus child care or by prioritizing access to child care subsidies for student parents.

Provide greater financial support for student parents.

- **Provide relief for student borrowers and address the ongoing student debt crisis.** A recent IWPR survey on student debt found that Black student mothers took out more loans than student mothers overall and were more likely to owe money to an institution compared to all student mothers. Additionally, student mothers were more likely to report basic needs insecurity than student fathers (Dundar, Tighe, and Turner 2023). IWPR analysis of 2020 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) data shows that almost three-fourths (73 percent) of Black single mother students said that they could not come up with \$2,000 in the next month (National Center for Education Statistics 2020). Financial insecurity hinders students' ability to focus on their coursework (Fletcher et al. 2023). IWPR's recent landscape scan of state and federal policy solutions for student parent success recommends that state and federal legislators examine the short- and long-term financial implications of student debt, explore financial assistance programs for student parents, and consider providing free or reduced tuition for low-income students (Doorley, Elakbawy, and Dundar 2023).

- **Explore policy options to support student parents' access to basic needs.** IWPR recommends that policymakers examine social services programs, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and the Housing Choice Voucher Program (Section 8) to ensure that student parents qualify for these services and that they can take advantage of them (Doorley, Elakbawy, and Dundar 2023).
- **Reinstate the Child Tax Credit.** As expanded in the American Rescue Plan, the Child Tax Credit (CTC)—a tax benefit for families with children—reduced child poverty by 35 percent when it was introduced in 2021 (Storz 2022). Unfortunately, the benefit expired at the end of 2021 and has not been reinstated.

Institutional Policy

Increase access to affordable child care that is available when students need it.

- **Implement flexible, drop-in child care programs.** For example, the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) partners with the Sanbridge Early Learning Center to offer flexible, drop-in child care to students in the area.
- **Explore collaboration between Head Start programs and community colleges.** Advocates have encouraged this approach as an option to increase access to affordable child care for student parents and support early childhood learning (Association of Community College Trustees and National Head Start Association 2023). NASPA, Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education suggests that colleges use on-campus child care centers as hubs for providing various student parent support services (Chamberlain 2018).

Provide institutional support that is tailored to the needs of single mother students.

Tailoring institutional support to the needs of single mother students benefits institutions as well as single mothers. Incorporating this into student success initiatives means better institutional retention and completion outcomes overall, which are important measures on which institutions are assessed and are typically part of institutional strategic plans. Below, we detail actions institutions should take to enhance their support for single mother students:

- **Offer virtual tutoring with flexible hours.** Having access to virtual tutoring with flexible hours supports single mothers' educational success as it allows them to receive tutoring without having to travel to campus and do so as their schedule permits (and with their children in tow).
- **Provide parenting students with subsidized transportation.** A major issue that affects single mother students is a lack of access to reliable transportation. Institutions can support student parents by implementing an affordable (or free) bus system specifically for these students or by providing rideshare vouchers.
- **Provide affordable, accessible housing for single mother students.** Single mother students often struggle with housing insecurity at some point in their lives. Colleges can support student parents in finding affordable housing by partnering with state and local housing

authorities. For example, through a partnership with Columbus Scholar House, an organization that provides affordable housing for low-income student-parent families, Ohio State University's Access Collaborative program helps student parents secure affordable housing (The Ohio State University: Office of Diversity and Inclusion 2024).

- **Provide on-campus housing specifically for student mothers.** The College of Saint Mary in Omaha, Nebraska, offers on-campus housing for single mother students with children ages six weeks to 12 years through their Mothers Living and Learning program. Through this program, students have access to dedicated advisors, faculty, and staff members to support them, in addition to workshops and courses tailored to their needs and goals (College of Saint Mary 2024).
- **Prioritize integration of student-parent housing with other campus housing.** Some participants spoke about student-parent housing being separate from other student housing on campus. Colleges should aim to keep student-parent housing and other student housing close together to facilitate student parents' sense of belonging and inclusion on campus.
- **Offer students the opportunity to stack credentials.** While measures to enable student parents to stay enrolled are important, sometimes staying in school for multiple years may not be a preferred or feasible option for student parents. Colleges should offer student parents the opportunity to receive short-term credentials along the way, which is known as "stacking credentials." Stacking credentials enables students to complete shorter credentials such as certificate programs in specific areas (e.g., cybersecurity or computer programming) that they can later use toward completing a degree program if they choose to do so (Meyer and Castleman 2021). Credential stacking has the potential to increase students' employability and earnings (Meyer, Bird, and Castleman 2022). The ability to stack credentials is useful for student parents, as they often must start and stop pursuing a degree at times due to life circumstances.

Provide more mental, social, and emotional support for Black single mother student parents.

- **Establish support groups or affinity groups for student parents.** Colleges should consider establishing support groups or affinity groups for student parents and single student parents (this can be developed in collaboration with the college's office on diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging or student support services). Affinity groups cultivate a sense of inclusion and belonging for students (Crumb 2021).
- **Target campus social event advertising to student parents by allowing them to bring their children along whenever it is possible.** Most colleges host and/or sponsor a variety of social events throughout the academic year. Student affairs departments should consider indicating which campus social events are family-friendly so that student parents are encouraged to bring their children. This type of targeted advertising may help student parents feel like they are part of the larger campus community.
- **Train campus mental health practitioners on the unique mental health issues facing student parents.** This training, in addition to helping faculty and staff understand the issues student parents face, can help create a more welcoming environment for student parents and help them feel more comfortable utilizing campus mental health services (Ascend at the Aspen Institute 2021). When necessary, practitioners, faculty, and staff should refer students to external resources; for example, if the institution does not have the capacity to provide the

proper mental health support for students or if the mental health staff is unable to provide adequate care for students with diverse identities.

Consider ways to reduce student parents' financial burden and thus promote their retention and degree completion.

- **Create financial opportunities designed specifically with student parents in mind.** While student parents may qualify for some existing scholarships, merit awards, or financial aid, colleges should consider additional ways to target financial assistance specifically to this population, including by offering reduced tuition and fees for student parents or including child care in student parents' financial aid awards (Doorley, Elakbawy, and Dundar 2023; US Government Accountability Office 2019).
- **Create innovative financial aid options tailored to the financial challenges student parents encounter.** Since financial aid typically expires for students after six years, institutions should consider implementing what one participant referred to as "second-chance financial aid programs." These types of programs would be beneficial for student parents, as they often have multiple starts and stops when pursuing their education.



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