



A Portrait of Single Student Parents: Financial and Academic Barriers to a Postsecondary Degree

Raising children while working and pursuing a postsecondary degree presents challenges for any family; however, single student parents often encounter additional obstacles as they strive to complete their degrees in a timely manner. Single student parents find themselves having to fit into the mold of a traditional college student, typically a student without dependents, because financial, academic, and social supports are designed for traditional students (Cerven, 2013; Graham & Bassett, 2011; Santiago, 2013). If higher education institutions better understood the challenges faced by single student parents, they could develop policies and programs to help this population achieve more equitable outcomes in terms of persistence and completion (Fenster, 2004; Goldrick-Rab, 2009; Mason, 2002; Yakaboski, 2010). This OCCRL brief provides a financial and academic portrait of single student parents. In addition, policies that may hinder access and persistence are explored to highlight opportunities for institutional improvement.

Obtaining a postsecondary credential can provide economic security and social mobility for single parent families while unleashing a potential wealth of human capital to meet the nation's workforce needs (White House, 2011). By completing a postsecondary credential, women in particular increase their access to higher paying jobs and healthcare for their families (Lee, 2007) and in some instances the increase in income is immediate (Rose & Hartmann, 2004). This increased social mobility extends to women of all backgrounds and races (Adair, 2001; Center for Women Policy Studies, 2002; Zhan & Pandley, 2004). As a result of their open access mission (Cerven, 2013; White House, 2010) and relative affordability, community colleges have emerged as critical leaders in the effort to create opportunities for diverse students, including single parents. Bragg and Durham (2012) state: "[i]f not for community colleges, the overall higher education system would enroll fewer racial and ethnic minorities and fewer low-income, immigrant, and first-generation students" (p. 108). Another population that is "hidden" in the diverse student body attending community colleges are college students who are raising children.

Student Parents in Higher Education

Approximately 26 percent of all postsecondary students or 4.8 million students who attended a postsecondary institution in 2011–2012 were parents (Gault, Reichlin, Reynolds, & Froehner, 2014). Almost half (2.1 million) of the total number of student parents enrolled in college in 2011–2012 attended a community college (Gault et al., 2014) (see Figure 1).

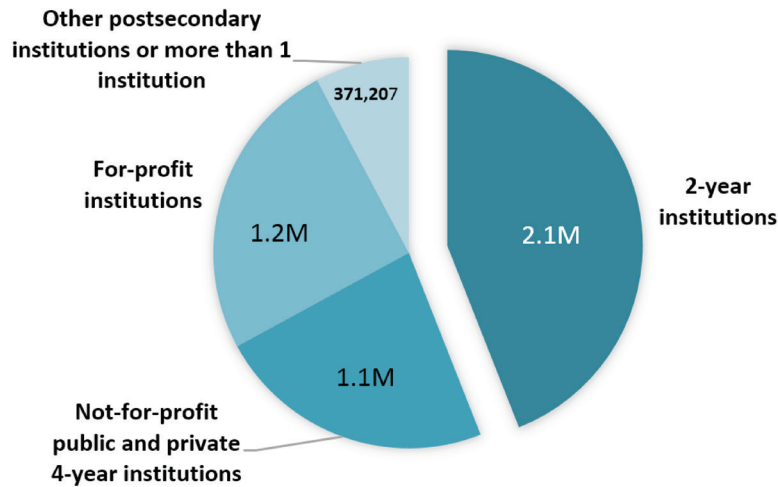


Figure 1. Undergraduate Student Parents' Enrollment by Institutional Type (2011–2012)

Note: Institute on Women's Policy Research (IWPR) analysis of U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2011–12 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study. Adapted from "College affordability for low-income adults: Improving returns on investment for families and society," by B. Gault, L. Reichlin, S. Román, 2014, Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research. Retrieved from <http://www.iwpr.org/publications/pubs/college-affordability-for-low-income-adults-improving-returns-on-investment-for-families-and-society>.

Overall, 71 percent of student parents across postsecondary institutions are women, and approximately 60 percent or 2 million of these women are single parents¹ (Gault, Reichlin, & Román, 2014) (see Figure 2). In other words, approximately 43 percent of the total number of student parents in 2011–2012 were single mothers (Gault, Reichlin, & Román, 2014).

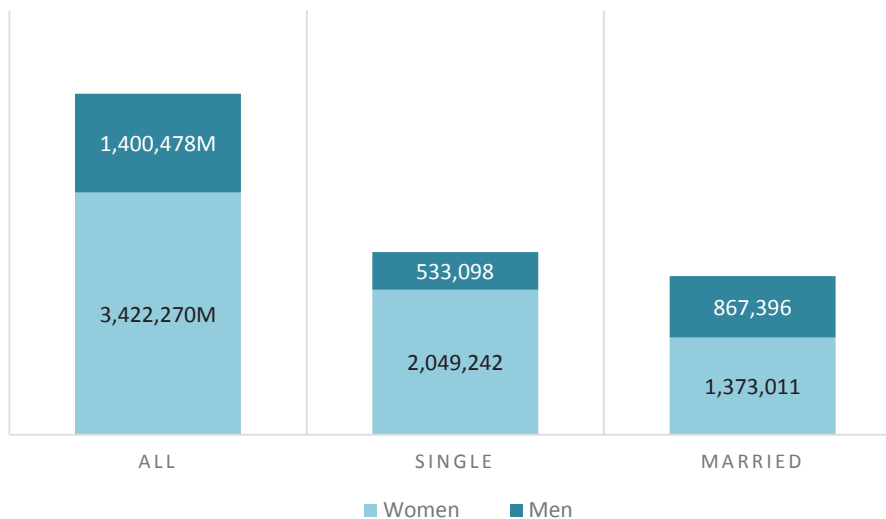


Figure 2. Undergraduate Student Parents' Enrollment by Gender and Marital Status

Note: IWPR analysis of U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2011–12 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study. Adapted from "College affordability for low-income adults: Improving returns on investment for families and society," by B. Gault, L. Reichlin, S. Román, 2014, Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research. Retrieved from <http://www.iwpr.org/publications/pubs/college-affordability-for-low-income-adults-improving-returns-on-investment-for-families-and-society>.

¹ A single parent is defined in federal legislation as an individual who is either unmarried or legally separated from a spouse and has custody or joint custody of a minor child or children, or is pregnant. See <http://icsps.illinoisstate.edu/special-populations-resources/>.

Using data from the 2011–2012 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, the Institute for Women’s Policy Research concluded that of all the student mothers, women of color are more likely to be student parents than white women (see Table 1) (Gault, Reichlin, & Román, 2014).

	Total	Asian	American Indian or Alaska Native	Black	Hispanic or Latino	Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	White
Women	32%	18%	41%	47%	32%	39%	29%
Men	18%	11%	24%	25%	18%	15%	16%

Table 1. Proportion of Undergraduate Students Who have Children by Gender and Race/Ethnicity

Note. IWPR analysis of U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2011–12 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study. Adapted from “College affordability for low-income adults: Improving returns on investment for families and society,” by B. Gault, L. Reichlin, S. Román, 2014, Washington, DC: Institute for Women’s Policy Research. Retrieved from <http://www.iwpr.org/publications/pubs/college-affordability-for-low-income-adults-improving-returns-on-investment-for-families-and-society>.

Single Student Parents Access and Persistence—An Economic Perspective

Single student parents often rely on financial aid and public benefits to cover the cost of their education and living expenses. However, single student parents often find their financial aid packages inadequate to cover the full cost of education—college or course fees, books, and childcare while attending class, studying, or working (Gault, Reichlin, Reynolds, & Froehner, 2014; Graham & Bassett, 2011; Graham & Bassett, 2012). This can be particularly challenging when the student’s income cannot supplement the gaps in financial aid funding even though their expected family contribution² equates to zero (Graham & Bassett, 2011). Financial aid support may further complicate the life of a single student parent as they try to manage work obligations, sometimes as a component of financial aid or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and class schedules that require managing child care (Graham & Bassett, 2011). Moreover, financial aid may not be available to a student attending college part-time or during summer terms. These restrictions on financial aid can add stress to any student who requires financial assistance to attend college, and single student parents are no exception. Fragmented federal funding that requires different criteria and different student application processes, sometimes involving multiple applications in multiple data systems, create barriers to securing financial resources and complicates a single student parent’s ability to secure funds to go to college (Graham & Bassett, 2011).

The lack of funding for childcare services on college campuses is also problematic for single student parents. Given that many single student parents spend a significant number of waking hours caring for dependent children, which contributes to a longer time to degree than married parents, the provision of campus childcare may be the most high-impact reform for single parents (Cerven, 2013; Miller, Gault, & Thorman, 2011). Childcare centers on college campuses are limited and in many instances nonexistent (Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010; Graham & Bassett, 2011). On campuses with childcare centers, parents often face restrictive age limitations or hours of operation, and a waitlist for entry (Graham & Bassett, 2011). Recent reports (for example, Graham & Bassett, 2011; Miller, Gault, & Thorman, 2011), suggest funding for college-based childcare may only support approximately 160 postsecondary institutions nationwide and approximately 54,400 children. The only federal funding source for campus-based care for children

² Expected family contribution, calculated using the financial data gathered through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, is a measure that expresses the expected contribution of a student’s family toward her or his college education, including room and board, according to a formula established by federal law.

is through Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) (Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010), a federal program that bases funds on Pell Grant awards. However, the enrollment verification requirements that accompany this funding often make it difficult for parents to pay for childcare until after the first few weeks of class—weeks which are critical to course success and persistence (Graham & Bassett, 2011).

Single Student Parents Access and Persistence—An Academic Perspective

In addition to financial challenges, single student parents face hurdles that can affect their persistence and degree attainment once enrolled in college. For example, the strain of fulfilling multiple roles as a single parent and confusion about viable career pathways can pose particular challenges for this group (Forste & Jacobsen, 2013). In their analysis of barriers to college completion by single student mothers, Graham and Bassett (2012) suggest that colleges may be able to reduce time to a college degree by closely evaluating their degree programs for duplicative, non-credit bearing, or remedial courses. Weaving developmental or basic skill content into career- or degree-required courses or offering an accelerated option for students that demonstrate requisite knowledge and skills may also reduce the time to degree (Graham & Bassett, 2012). Although these strategies have not been implemented with cohorts of single student parents, they may provide structural cohesion, along with the academic and career guidance, that single student parents need to complete college.

Another important factor in single parent's persistence in college is the quality of the advising they receive. Advisor-to-student ratios in Illinois community colleges vary from 1:800 to 1:1200 (Bassett, 2009; Graham & Bassett, 2011), which is problematic for single student parents and other first-generation students, low-income students, returning adult students, military veterans, and others who rely on the support and guidance provided by advisors. Supporting students early in their college career and helping them select their program of study within their first year may increase their chances of completing a degree or transferring to a four-year college (Jenkins & Cho, 2012). In an environment in which students do not see advisors regularly, it is critical that advisors have strong knowledge of career pathways and a working knowledge of resources critical to student parent engagement and support. Another critical factor to student success and persistence is engagement with and integration into college life (Tinto, 1994).

Single student parents' lives are often complicated in ways that result in unexpected absences from their classes or degree programs due to child, family, or financial emergencies. Class attendance policies or mandated out-of-class learning opportunities may be a marginalizing factor for single student parents (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Yakaboski, 2010). In two separate case studies, researchers highlighted an unwelcoming campus climate for single student mothers who attempt to navigate multiple identities (e.g., student, mother, sole provider) with limited resources (e.g., money, family, healthcare, childcare). These studies show single student mothers feel discouraged when college faculty and fellow students' respond negatively to their missing class sessions, group work sessions, or other commitments due to childcare or related responsibilities (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Yakaboski, 2010). Cultural stereotyping and the perceived stigma of being a single student mother may prevent some student parents from completing courses (Duquaine-Watson, 2007). They may avoid seeking out support that could help them persist and succeed in college. To avoid the stigma, some single student mothers attempt to hide their identity as a single parent, which can create a challenging double life scenario (Duquaine-Watson, 2007).

Traditional models of student engagement, which rely on involving students on campus through learning communities and student leadership opportunities may not be a good fit for single student parents' lives. In the face of this challenge, some community colleges reframe the notion of student social and academic integration to focus on the time students' spend on mandatory, work study, and in-class activities (Braxton,

Milem, & Sullivan, 2000; Karp, Hughes, & O’Gara, 2011; Pascarella, Salisbury, & Blaich, 2011; Reason, 2009). Community colleges can boost student persistence through classroom-based activities that encourage academic and social integration by aiding in the development of critical networks among peers and faculty, helping students build capital to navigate the campus environment, and helping students to gain a sense of social belonging (Karp et al., 2011). For instance, colleges can structure orientation as a credit bearing course or seminar to introduce and support students who seek financial aid or funding opportunities, student services on campus, and academic resources or supports (Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010; Graham & Bassett, 2012). This curricular change supports many student groups who have limited time to commit to optional on-campus engagement, including first-generation students, returning adults, and student parents. This model also can be used to strengthen students’ connections to existing support networks on campus.

Recommendations

Track single student parent progress to college degrees. Colleges should collect supplemental student demographic data such as marital status, number and age of dependents, enrollment preferences (e.g., days and times of courses) to allow institutions to better predict and meet the financial and academic needs of students. Colleges should evaluate single student parents’ progress through degree programs to identify problematic or duplicative requirements or courses in credit-bearing, non-credit bearing, and remedial pathway offerings.

Enhance advising and guidance for student parents. In particular, the college’s academic advising and student supports should acknowledge and accommodate the needs of single student parents and college students who share similar characteristics (e.g., full-time employment or weekend only course-taking).

Make childcare available and affordable for student parents. Childcare is needed for the entire length of a degree, certificate, or program and efforts should be made to minimize gaps in childcare as a result of verification processes each semester or term. In addition, childcare centers should provide flexible schedules and accommodate for emergency childcare needs.

Engage student parents with campus life and events. Student parents should have the opportunity to be part of a community with their children so they can complete their college assignments, conduct research, and meet with advisors. This programming should support single student parents’ emotional and mental health, and be easily accessible through the college’s website, campus resource centers, recruitment materials, etc.

Use in-class activities and curriculum intentionally to share resources and build a sense of belonging. Colleges can encourage pedagogies and policies in the classroom that are inclusive of parents’ needs and review core courses and mandatory orientation sessions to ensure that opportunities to build a support network and access campus resources are embedded in classroom experiences.

Provide professional development opportunities for college counselors, advisors, faculty, and staff. These professional development opportunities need to address the social, emotional, and financial needs of student parents and shed light on their lived experiences.

Leverage federal, state, and local dollars to create a holistic and comprehensive financial assistance package responsive to the needs of single student parents. Specifically, college course-taking should allow student parents to customize their programs of study so they can complete courses part-time, less than part-time, and during summer sessions without jeopardizing financial aid packages.

Conclusion

A postsecondary degree or certification from a two- or four-year institution provides the social mobility and capital single student parents need to reach their economic, professional, and personal goals. The multigenerational effect of an educated mother on her children's education and future attainment cannot be disputed (Attewell, Lavin, Domia, & Levey, 2009; Goldrick-Rab, 2009); however, for student parents balancing the needs of their children while pursuing a degree requires on- and off-campus attention and support. This is especially true for single student parents. Community colleges play a crucial role in easing the challenges facing student parents while advancing their own mission of educating students to meet the needs of our changing society.

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