



Achieving the Dream™

Community College Women Succeed

RESEARCH AGENDA
MAY 2021



Introduction

Over half of community college students are women (55 percent); among these women, one-third are mothers, 60 percent of whom are single.¹ Women—especially single mothers and women of color—have unique and layered experiences while pursuing postsecondary education that can affect their ability to persist and graduate. Especially for women with caregiving responsibilities and those facing economic insecurity, finding the time, energy, and resources to devote to college can present significant obstacles to success. Understanding these women’s experiences—including who they are, where they attend school, their support needs, and their academic and economic outcomes—at the national, state, institutional, and community levels is essential for designing a higher education system that can close equity gaps and set up all students for success.

Building on existing research, further data collection and investigation are needed to add to the evidence around which policies and practices can effectively promote community college completion among women and mothers. The following aspirational research agenda outlines key areas of research needed to expand and strengthen knowledge around promoting women and mothers’

¹ 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).

community college success. The agenda was developed based on the insight and contributions of members of Achieving the Dream's Community College Women Succeed Advisory Group. While not all proposed research described in the agenda is necessarily feasible now, primarily due to gaps in available data, the agenda is intended to inform and guide new areas of inquiry as the landscape of data, policy, and practice evolve. Specifically, the agenda is intended to:

- guide advisory group members' thinking about top research questions, possibly for consideration for funded research, and
- be used by graduate students and community college practitioners to build knowledge in the field.

For all agenda items below, the lived experiences and voices of women in community college should be central to the development of new research. Research should acknowledge and explore the complex and multifaceted nature of women's identities and how those identities may come into play with their educational and economic outcomes. In particular, applying an intersectional and racial equity lens, including but not limited to data disaggregation, is essential to exposing and understanding persistent gaps in today's higher education system and to designing equitable pathways to opportunity that benefit all women.

Research Agenda

1. Descriptive evidence on who student parents are, where they are in the system, and their educational outcomes

More data and analyses are needed to understand the basic demographic and socioeconomic characteristics and academic outcomes of community college women and student parents, especially at the state and institutional levels. Currently, federal postsecondary datasets only allow for national- and regional-level analysis of students with children. Improved and expanded data collection on students who have caregiving demands from institutions and state higher education systems is needed to fully understand student parents' trajectory through community college. Given the increased likelihood that Black and Indigenous women in community college are mothers, disaggregating these data by race/ethnicity, marital status, number and age of children, among other variables, is also essential for applying an intersectional lens to the student parent experience. Data that allow for longitudinal analysis, especially beyond the traditional six-year timeframe, would also help shed light on attainment outcomes for student parents who may take prolonged breaks from higher education.

Further qualitative work to center the voices and experiences of students with children and women at community colleges will also fill gaps in understanding, strengthen cases for better data collection, and provide vital insight to guide program and policy design.

2. Labor market outcomes

A. Earnings and employment

Community colleges help students reach a variety of aims, including getting the skills and credentials they need to secure a job and family-sustaining wages. Exploring the employment outcomes of women and mothers/caregivers is critical to understanding how well community colleges are supporting these students' trajectories into the labor market. Variation by occupational sector, as well as disaggregation by race, ethnicity, marital status, and parental status, will further illuminate persistent areas of inequity as well as areas of promise and progress. The gender pay gap—widest for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous women—is well established, and analysis of wage gaps specifically after graduating from community college programs would further inform this body of literature as well as institutional, state, and community strategies to work for pay equity.

B. Wealth accumulation

In addition to the gender pay gap, women, especially women of color, hold less wealth than men. Alongside analysis illuminating patterns in women's borrowing to attend community college, research on women's ability to build wealth after graduating community college is merited. This would include further quantitative and qualitative research on women's ability to repay student loans and other debt and time and earnings needed to build savings and other forms of wealth. In particular, understanding the role of community college attainment as well as student debt in the ability of women and mothers of color to build and transmit wealth will shed light on the role community college plays in closing economic, racial, and gender equity gaps.



3. Recruitment and enrollment practices

Both quantitative and qualitative analysis of strategies intended to increase enrollment—or enrollment intensity—of women and student parents can help institutions identify and adopt best practices. These analyses would be well complemented by inquiry into students' decision-making processes around the number of classes, credit hours, or length of program to pursue per term or overall. Further inquiry into colleges' outreach to prospective students who are parents, especially women, is also merited. At a more granular level, we encourage evaluation of strategies to enroll women in programs leading to jobs where women are historically underrepresented. Content analysis of promotional materials and other qualitative inquiry into recruitment and academic advising strategies could provide insight into effective strategies to recruit, enroll, and support women, parents, and other caregivers in the full breadth of programs offered at the community college.

4. Student success strategies

A. Adapting what works for other student groups

A growing body of research has sought to understand how to improve college outcomes for students with low incomes, first-generation students, Black, Indigenous, and people of color, as well as adult students, among other traditionally marginalized student groups. As evidence emerges on what works to promote these students' success, practitioners need better information on how these strategies fit with the needs of students with children or other caregiving responsibilities and whether they need to be adapted to effectively promote success among the student parent population. For example, what works and what does not work for parents in accelerated, online degree, or competency-based programs? How can existing interventions adapt to the needs of students with caregiving demands? How effective are various kinds of advising structures for student parents? How do student parents perceive the benefits and challenges associated with hands-on learning experiences in community college programs of study? Does proactive communication from faculty or staff encourage women and student parents to stay enrolled?

B. Understanding unique strategies for student parents

As evidence grows around how to promote college success among traditionally marginalized student groups, rigorous evaluation of what is causally effective and the size of that effect for student parents is necessary for designing inclusive interventions and closing equity gaps in attainment. Studies examining the effects of

policy and practice on student outcomes should collect data on and disaggregate results by parent status, gender, marital status, race/ethnicity, age of child, income, and other variables, to identify variations in outcomes. New evaluations should look specifically at on- and off-campus supports that descriptive and qualitative evidence suggest are effective for parenting students, including subsidized childcare and CCAMPIS programs, case management/coaching, enhanced financial assistance, peer support, and mentorship



programs, among other strategies. In addition, building knowledge around what affects success rates for student parents of different racial/ethnic backgrounds and different marital statuses would also be helpful for equitable policy and practice design.

5. Financing education

A. How women pay for college

A 2018 analysis of the Adult Technical Education Survey (ATES) indicated that women earned less than male peers after completing a sub-baccalaureate credential and were more likely than men to pay out of pocket for their programs. While men were more likely to receive employer support or resources through the public workforce system, women were more likely to use personal resources or debt to finance their tuition for these sub-baccalaureate programs. Further research is needed to understand the resources women use to pay for community college, how this varies by race, ethnicity, age, credential level, marital status, and presence and age of children or other dependent care responsibilities, and which expenses are the most financially burdensome relative to their college pursuit.

B. Debt—sources and reasons

Women whose cost of college outstrips available aid and personal resources may turn to debt to finance their higher education. However, different kinds of debt may impact women and student parents' or caregivers' financial future differently. Analysis of women's and student parents' use of federal student loans, private loans, credit cards, and other forms of debt to finance higher education will be critical to shape family-friendly financial aid and student loan policy. Additionally, qualitative study into why women and parents borrow is merited: Are women and student parents borrowing to pay tuition to compensate for reduced work hours, to pay for child care, etc.? Disaggregation by race, ethnicity, age, marital status, and parental status will provide an even clearer picture of the ways policy and practice around borrowing and financing can better serve women community college students.

6. Understanding the experiences of children

Anecdotal and qualitative evidence suggest that the children of student parents have unique experiences as they and their parents complete their educational programs simultaneously. Qualitative research to explore the experiences of student parents' children can shed light on needed changes in existing educational systems and practices that can better support their development and well-being—which will also likely benefit parents. Longitudinal research could also examine whether parents' pursuit of higher education may have an effect on children's educational outcomes in youth and their likelihood of attending college themselves.



7. Community college women and COVID-19

The coronavirus pandemic has upended life across the country and altered plans for and experiences of higher education, especially for women with caregiving responsibilities. The economic downturn caused by COVID-19 has also been disproportionately felt by women, both due to historic unemployment in concentrated in female-dominated sectors and to the unequal burden of care shouldered by women in and out of the labor force. Quantitative analysis of enrollment patterns and means of financing postsecondary education and training could shed light on disparities, when disaggregated by gender, race, ethnicity, age, parental/caregiver status, and age of dependents. Qualitative inquiry into the experiences and decision-making processes of women, mothers, and other female caregivers related to educational pursuits is needed to better understand how these individuals view tradeoffs around time and resources. For mothers, understanding how children’s education—and the way their children’s education is delivered during COVID-19—factors into their higher education plans is important to better understand how to support their continued engagement with college attainment. Analysis of institutional responses to student support needs among women and student caregivers, including physical and mental health, housing, food, and child care needs, could surface best practices of use to other colleges for keeping female students engaged, even if they are forced to take temporary enrollment breaks.



Achieving the Dream™

Achieving the Dream (ATD) leads a growing network of more than 300 community colleges committed to helping their students, particularly low-income students and students of color, achieve their goals for academic success, personal growth, and economic opportunity. ATD is making progress in closing equity gaps and accelerating student success through a unique change process that builds each college’s institutional capacities in seven essential areas. ATD, along with nearly 75 experienced coaches and advisors, works closely with Network colleges in 45 states and the District of Columbia to reach more than 4 million community college students. Follow us on Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn.

