

A SERIES OF FOUR  
BRIEFS EXAMINING THE  
SUPPORT NEEDS OF  
DIFFERENT COMMUNITY  
COLLEGE STUDENT  
POPULATIONS.

# EQUITY IN DESIGN FOR HOLISTIC STUDENT SUPPORTS



## Increasing Success for Student Mothers at Community Colleges

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Achieving  
the Dream™

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# 'Connecting the Dots' for Student Mothers

After working overnight 12-hour shifts as an inspector and warehouse worker for five years to support her children, Connie Welton learned in 2018 that her Arkansas steel-painting plant was closing in 30 days. The single mother of three found herself at Phillips Community College of the University of Arkansas (PCCUA). "I was so overwhelmed," she says. "It took everything in me to come to the college—I didn't want to. I didn't know how I was going to get through it."

It wasn't Welton's first time in higher ed—an avid writer of poetry with a self-published collection, she was the first in her family to graduate high school and had previously attended college before stopping out. But on her first visit to PCCUA after learning the plant was closing, she was immediately asked if she had children and a place to stay. After being shown the food pantry and a clothing closet with professional clothes for job interviews, "suddenly I felt lighter," she says. Dislocated worker programs and the state's Career Pathways Initiative, launched in 2006 to support low-income parents as they pursue a certificate or degree, provided financial assistance for Welton, along with advising, gas vouchers to help cover transportation to campus, and connection to other academic, career, and personal supports.

Now 36, Welton is enrolled in a two-year medical lab tech program and tutors other students at PCCUA. She recently testified in Little Rock about the benefits of the Career Pathways Initiative administered by the Arkansas Department of Higher Education and funded through the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program and other college programs. In particular, she emphasized how staff at PCCUA anticipated her needs and provided a wide range of integrated supports. "They connected all the dots," she says.

In Connecticut, Gabrielle deCastro had worked as a nanny since moving to the United States from the Caribbean in her late 20s. Having left school after the 6th grade, deCastro decided it was time to return to school after having a child of her own. "It's a huge sacrifice to go back to school when you have kids," she says.

After struggling to navigate an unfamiliar education system and ultimately enrolling at Housatonic Community College after acing her GED, she was referred by a professor to the Family Economic Security Program (FESP), a program providing a wide range of services and supports to low-income students at two Connecticut colleges. The program helped identify scholarships that allowed her to take summer courses while her son was in camp, but more importantly FESP advisors helped deCastro, who wound up at Housatonic without fully understanding the process of applying to and attending college, find stable footing.

"They were the ones who helped me navigate my way through," she says. Now majoring in psychology at the University of Bridgeport with a 4.0 GPA with the goal of becoming a school psychologist, deCastro wishes the four-year institution had similar supports.

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“The Career Pathways Initiative... provided financial assistance for Welton, along with advising, gas vouchers to help cover transportation to campus, and connection to other academic, career, and personal supports.”

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Pictured on the cover: From left: Gateway student to be named; PCCUA 2015 GED honor grad Sarah Webster surrounded by family (L-R) Leslie Webster, Jodie Cook, Marlee Cook, Sarah Webster, Jace Webster, Jason Webster, George Webster, and Pat Webster.

# Diverse Experiences, Shared Challenges

Welton and Castro’s experiences are different, but both represent the nearly 4 million student parents—the majority of whom are women—attending colleges across the country.

Like Welton, whose children are older, and deCastro, who is married, they don’t always fit neatly into the template of feel-good news stories featuring community college student mothers bucking the odds to walk in graduation ceremonies with a toddler in their arms—and too often, the kinds of supports that student mothers need to reach that life-changing milestone are absent from campuses across the country. But in both cases, their personal determination to succeed was backed by an array of supports offered through programs focused on supporting student mothers at the community colleges they attended.

Student mothers represent a diverse community of learners, who like other adult learners often choose the flexible enrollment options and the low cost of tuition at community colleges as the door through which they enter—or return to—higher education.

Student mothers also are represented within a wide range of growing community college student populations, including women, student parents, low-income students, adult learners entering or returning to college later in life, and students of color. Like all these groups, student mothers require intentional attention and support to enable them to meet their academic and career goals. And improving outcomes for student mothers also is vital for institutions to meet their goals of improving equity in outcomes and the broader economic imperative of increasing overall postsecondary attainment. As with the other briefs in this series, this brief focuses on the importance of institutions designing and providing holistic student supports that meet the specific needs of their own student populations.



Connie Welton is pursuing an associate’s degree in Medical Laboratory Technology and is expected to graduate in May 2021.

## MORE ON HOLISTIC STUDENT SUPPORTS

**Overview** [www.achievingthedream.org/resources/initiatives/holistic-student-supports](http://www.achievingthedream.org/resources/initiatives/holistic-student-supports)

**Holistic Student Supports Redesign: A Toolkit for Redesigning Advising and Student Services to Effectively Support Every Student** [www.achievingthedream.org/sites/default/files/resources/atd\\_hss\\_redesign\\_toolkit\\_2018.pdf](http://www.achievingthedream.org/sites/default/files/resources/atd_hss_redesign_toolkit_2018.pdf)

**Community College Women Succeed** <https://www.achievingthedream.org/resources/initiatives/community-college-women-succeed>

# What the Data Tells Us

Student mothers often straddle multiple demographic populations important to community colleges—women, parents, students of color, and those facing significant financial challenges. Women represent the majority of college students across all institution types, and more women attend community colleges than four-year campuses.<sup>1</sup> Women, on average, often do better than men at many institutions, yet stark equity gaps among women are revealed when data is disaggregated by age, and importantly, by whether they are parents.

Understanding these equity gaps is crucial to serving student mothers, as the majority of the 3.8 million student parents in higher education attend community colleges. One in four community college students are parents, and seven in ten parents raising children while in college are women, according to the Institute for Women's Policy Research.<sup>2</sup>

The proportions of undergraduate student parents and student mothers have remained steady for most of the century, according to an analysis conducted by the United States Government Accountability Office in August 2019. And student mothers are significantly more likely to face greater challenges than their peers—including other parents. While 15 percent of all community college students are single parents, student mothers are more likely than not to be single parents (62 percent), while student fathers are more likely to be married (61 percent).<sup>3</sup> Women of color, and particularly African American women, are significantly more likely than women from other backgrounds to be raising children in college.<sup>4</sup> And the vast majority of single student mothers (89 percent) are low income and have

limited family support to cover college expenses. They are also likely to attend part-time and incur substantial student debt, in part due to the high cost of child care—which costs the equivalent of roughly one-third of working single mothers' median annual incomes—and their disproportionate enrollment in for-profit institutions.<sup>5</sup> In 33 states and the District of Columbia, the average cost of childcare is higher than in-state college tuition, and nearly half of student parents reported paying for child care, with monthly costs averaging about \$490.<sup>6</sup>

Single student mothers face other challenges, including time—they spend an average of nine hours a day caring for their children and other responsibilities within the home, leaving little time for school, much less the time required to navigate the academic, career, and personal supports that can help address these challenges. Compared to female students who are not mothers, they spend more time per day on care, housework and paid work, and substantially less on homework, class, and sleep.<sup>7</sup> Many also face guilt and fear of stigma, as well as isolation and lack of family support and, in too many cases, abusive environments.

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“Single mothers with associate degrees who work full-time, full-year earn \$8,000 more a year—and \$329,498 more over a lifetime—than those with high school diplomas.”

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These socioeconomic realities impact the likelihood of success for single mothers. While student parents as a whole achieve higher GPAs than their peers,<sup>8</sup> just 8 percent of single mothers who enroll in college graduate earn an associate or bachelor’s degree within six years, compared with 49 percent of women who are not parents and 28 percent of all student parents.<sup>9</sup> Those who do succeed, however, are significantly more likely to improve their lives and those of their children: Single mothers with only a high school diploma are nearly twice as likely to live in poverty than those with an associate degree and three times more likely to live in poverty than those with a bachelor’s degree. Any postsecondary credential reduces their chances of living in poverty by nearly one-third, and single mothers with associate degrees who work full-time, full-year earn \$8,000 more a year—and \$329,498 more over a lifetime—than those with high school diplomas.<sup>10</sup>

Economic analyses confirm that investments in supports, including but not limited to childcare, more than pay for themselves in tax revenues from increased earnings over a lifetime. Equally importantly, research has long affirmed that children of college-educated parents are far more likely to attend college themselves, providing the greatest opportunity to break the

persistent intergenerational cycle of poverty. And our work with more than 150 institutions, including several profiled in this brief, suggests that when supported, student mothers can—and do—succeed, often at better rates than their peers without children.

“We can’t resolve all issues many of our students face, but we can certainly put a big dent in the barriers many of them face. We can help build trust, provide support, and encourage students to stay in school,” PCCUA leaders said in an ATD survey.



2018 GED graduate Samtira McChristian is shown holding her daughter, Kammie.

# Community Colleges and Student Mothers

As president of Everett Community College in Washington, Dr. Daria J. Willis knows firsthand the challenges single mothers face—she was one. After becoming pregnant as a teenager, “I was dumb enough to get married, smart enough to get a divorce, and brave enough to raise my daughter by myself,” she says.

*In her current role she says, “I’m very open about my experiences. I want students to know I’ve been there. I was on WIC in Florida because I didn’t have enough money. I know what it’s like to raise a child by yourself. I think it’s important for students to see you raw, who you are, that they can do it, too. I hope through my story they see if she can have a kid at 19 and 2.0 GPA and still graduate with honors, what about me?”<sup>11</sup>*

A growing number of community and technical colleges have made significant commitments to designing and sustaining supportive learning environments that help all students, including student mothers, realize their potential while also integrating the necessary academic, career, and personal supports that make it possible for an increasingly vulnerable student population—many of whom face food and housing insecurity, along with financial and family challenges—to realize their goals.

ATD is deeply committed to supporting institutions in developing a holistic student supports approach that embraces the interconnectedness of academic and personal supports to ensure that students receive the supports they need to succeed in college. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to providing these supports, community colleges which have been successful at transforming their institutions to meet the needs of the students they serve have focused on a few common strategies. They have sought to understand the specific needs of their students. They are clear about the problems that they are trying to solve within their unique contexts. And they intentionally design solutions that address those problems head on, rather than implementing incremental, piecemeal solutions and initiatives.



Dr. Daria J. Willis, president of Everett Community College

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“ATD is engaging with thought leaders and Achieving the Dream Network colleges to help institutions develop evidence-based supports that help women succeed and provide better economic opportunities for themselves and their families.”

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As part of this work, ATD’s Community College Women Succeed initiative seeks to identify and promote effective strategies to create, expand, and evaluate work to support adult women students and student mothers and their success in community college and the workforce. ATD is engaging with thought leaders and Achieving the Dream Network colleges to help institutions develop evidence-based supports that help women succeed and provide better economic opportunities for themselves and their families.<sup>12</sup>

Many of the institutions ATD has worked with have recognized the importance of supporting student mothers. In many cases these efforts are not boutique standalone programs. Rather, supports for student mothers are integrated into broader programs and services that serve other key—and often overlapping—student populations. And programs that serve all underserved populations are highly likely to benefit student mothers. For example, the Family Economic Security Program (FESP) at Housatonic and Gateway Community Colleges in Connecticut is targeted at all low- to mid-income students, but nearly half (40 percent) of students in the program are student mothers. Nearly two-thirds have an annual income of less than \$20,000, and the vast majority are students of color (87 percent) and older, nontraditional students (35 is the average age).



Within these broader efforts, however, several approaches are emerging as effective strategies for supporting student mothers. They are:

- **Identifying student mothers in intentional and consistent ways and building relationships with them** as part of broader improvements in intake and advising systems.
- **Building systems and processes that connect students with services** to help student mothers access the services they need, including childcare, flexible and accelerated learning options, and structures and activities focused on improving engagement.
- **Addressing gender inequities and promoting socioeconomic mobility** by creating clear pathways towards greater financial stability for student mothers and their families—an emerging area of focus with opportunities for continued learning and innovation.

Students Regina Scates (left) and Christina Bedoja (right) at the launch of the FESP program in 2015

## Identifying Student Mothers and Building Relationships

Community colleges committed to reinventing themselves to focus on the needs of their students begin with intentional efforts to truly know their students. Instead of saying “students just don’t use the services we offer,” they ask “how do our policies, practices, communications, and culture contribute to students not getting connected to our services?” That’s particularly critical for student mothers, who may resist enrolling in programs or identifying themselves as mothers because they are embarrassed by their financial situation or be unaware that they are eligible for services. “It can be uncomfortable in a school setting where they’re trying to change their lives and be someone different,” says Alese Mulvihill, interim dean of student affairs at Gateway and director of Housatonic’s FESP program.

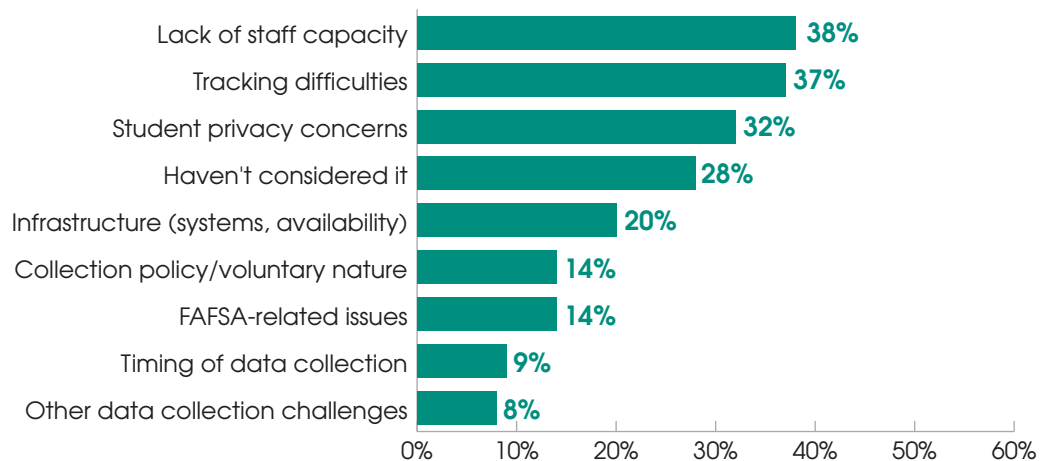
Serving student mothers requires first and foremost identifying them. However, a recent survey of ATD institutions conducted as part of the Community College Women Succeed initiative identified a wide range of barriers in tracking students with

dependent children, including a lack of institutional or staff capacity, challenges obtaining accurate data, and privacy concerns (see chart below). Beyond specific barriers, nearly three in 10 of the institutions surveyed (28 percent) haven’t considered doing so.

However, as with other subgroups, identifying student mothers is essential to helping tailor a more personalized experience by connecting students to relevant supports. Among the ways of doing so:

- **Intake processes and pre-enrollment surveys.** While FAFSA data can indicate whether students have dependent children, significant numbers of students don’t complete the form. College applications or intake surveys can include questions about whether students care for children, allowing institutions to disaggregate data about their needs and outcomes. Monroe Community College in New York, for example, surveys students about their marital and parental status each semester

### Barriers Faced in Tracking Students with Dependent Children (n = 65)





as part of the course registration process. Students referred to broader holistic support programs can also be asked about their parenting status and associated challenges as part of onboarding. For its Success Network Coaching program, East Arkansas Community College lists on its student intake information form a series of issues facing parents, ranging from locating and paying for reliable childcare to child support problems and single-parent issues, as well as asking if students need help with parenting skills.<sup>13</sup>

- **Faculty referrals.** As they develop relationships with students during the semester, faculty members often learn about details of their students' lives and can play a critical role in identifying student mothers with the greatest needs for institutional supports. That was the case for deCastro, whose psychology professor walked her across the hall from his classroom to the FESP advisors' office at Housatonic. Ensuring faculty are aware that supports are available and know how to approach and refer students can be a critical entry point to services. Many colleges have held training for faculty and staff to bolster awareness of student needs and how to make referrals to appropriate services. "Professors know the need," says Mulvihill.
- **Advisers and other student support staff.** Scheduled meetings with advisers and less structured engagements with other student support staff can help identify student mothers and ensure that support is sustained through the student's journey. For example, some colleges embed an intake survey

with questions about parenting in the first advising visit. PCCUA advisors review the individual career plans all incoming students fill out when they enroll and follow up with Career Pathways students during three mandatory one-on-one meetings during the first semester, as well as through the program's student success classes. Beyond the initial semester, ongoing structured or unstructured engagements with advisers and student support staff can also identify students who become mothers during their college journey.

- **Follow-up from emergency aid requests.** While students may be reluctant to discuss their finances or other aspects of their personal lives, many institutions offer emergency grants or loans for unexpected challenges students face, such as auto repairs or utility bills. Some, including Northeast Wisconsin Technical College, incorporate emergency funds into a continuum of support services. Institutions can identify and connect student mothers to additional integrated services as part of the follow up after they make emergency aid requests for these immediate needs.
- **Raising the visibility of student mothers on campus.** Even with structures in place to identify student mothers, it's important to keep student mothers visible in campus activities. Housatonic and other institutions include pictures of student mothers in collateral such as brochures for prospective students and college websites. "Belonging is one of the most important things," says Dr. Deborah King, vice chancellor for instruction at PCCUA. "There are students who lack self-confidence about whether they should be here."

## Connecting Students with Services

Once student mothers are identified as described in the previous section, institutions can provide an integrated range of supports through comprehensive programs that address a wide range of needs as they arise for each student. At Housatonic Community College, the FESP program includes academic and financial coaching, connections to social services agencies, and financial support and referrals for childcare. Originally targeting student mothers when the program was founded at nearby Norwalk Community College in 2008, FESP has since expanded its mission to serving all low-income students with GPAs of 2.0 or higher at Housatonic and nearby Gateway Community College. Participants typically learn about the program through word of mouth as they navigate other campus activities or through faculty referrals.

At PCCUA, the Career Pathways program is open to all low-income parents, as suggested by its key funding source, the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program. However, the vast majority of participants are single mothers. “The single mother is probably the average profile of the typical student,” says King. The program, which identifies Pathway participants when incoming students fill out individual career plans, is bolstered by other services at PCCUA, including food banks, career closets with professional clothing for job interviews, mandatory student success coaches,

and financial coaching strengthened and integrated through the college’s participation in the Working Student Success Network (WSSN), an ATD program which has since been consolidated into broader holistic student support efforts.<sup>14</sup>

While strategies for designing, coordinating, and delivering services are similar to other student populations, a few areas may be of particular importance and/or sensitivity to student mothers, including:

- **Connecting students to community-based services.** As colleges develop targeted support programs to address the needs of student mothers, it’s important to recognize that institutions can’t—and don’t need to—provide all the supports themselves. A significant part of these institutions’ work involves connecting students to existing services in the community, such as food pantries and those offered through social service agencies or community-based organizations. Success coaching can include information about applying for food stamps and other benefits, but student mothers may be particularly reluctant to admit they need such services. At PCCUA, screening for eligibility is addressed at intake and in subsequent student success classes, but the college also made sure benefits access information is included on campus computers so students “can go into the library and check on their own,” King says.

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- **Providing a single case manager.** At Housatonic, the most significant shift in the FESP program after its initial cohort of students was moving to a one-coach model from a process which involved separate achievement and financial coaches. Doing so helped build stronger relationships between student mothers and coaches and, importantly, kept students from being “retraumatized by repeating their story several times,” Mulvihill says. “We do that all the time in higher ed.” To that end, coaches also relay information directly to different college offices, such as the registrar, to keep students from having to explain their situation multiple times in multiple offices. Integrated case-management systems could streamline these kinds of interactions, but in many cases individual coaches or advisers simply pick up the phone or even walk students over to specific offices. Intake surveys and case managers can help create a more personalized and integrated support experience for each student based on their needs. For example, not all student mothers need childcare, but a case manager could connect those who do to available providers. Furthermore, when students meet with their case managers regularly, they received sustained support throughout their college experience.

- **Considering student schedules in the timing and availability of services and classes.** It’s important to schedule coaching, advising, and other supports at times that student mothers will be able to access them. Consider offering services beyond typical 9 a.m. – 5 p.m. hours, or schedule student orientations in the evenings and offer childcare during these and other events to allow more student parents to attend.

It’s also important to provide student mothers with flexibility in scheduling their coursework. PCCUA, for example, identified that student mothers were not successful in 8 a.m. classes because they often interfered with their children’s own school schedules and encouraged advisors to schedule students in later classes whenever possible.

Strategies to accelerate learning and time to credential also are of particular importance to student mothers. These strategies include prior learning assessment, compressed terms, evening classes, and high-quality online learning.

- **Connecting student mothers with each other** to provide a sense of belonging and improve engagement. Having a support system that includes their peers provides student mothers with the critical emotional support that encourages college persistence. Student mothers often lack family support systems and can be isolated at home with their children. Colleges can be intentional about connecting them with other student parents through in- and out-of-class activities and programs, such as the affordable family focused outings to places like parks, zoos or aquariums Housatonic offers through FESP. “Building back that support system is so important,” Mulvihill says. Everett Community College supports a club for low-income student parents, SPLICE (Supporting Parents with Limited Incomes for College Education). Along with connecting student parents, SPLICE holds family activities such as holiday parties. Furthermore, creating family-friendly spaces on campus, like the dedicated space Everett Community College is developing in its library for student mothers to bring their children while they study without feeling ashamed of “their status as caregivers or parents,” as Willis put it, can provide more opportunities for student mothers to connect with each other and their children, bolstering their sense of belonging at the institution.<sup>15</sup>

- **Connecting student mothers to affordable childcare.** Important to all student parents, access to affordable childcare is indispensable to single mothers. More than 80 percent of single mothers state that access to affordable and quality childcare is essential to their ability to attend college.<sup>16</sup> Access to childcare also enables student mothers to access other support services that are available. One study found that access to childcare more than triples students’ likelihood of graduating on time, by far the most significant support for student mothers.<sup>17</sup>



Gabrielle deCastro and her son at Housatonic Community College graduation in 2018

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“A 2019 GAO study says the majority of undergraduates (60 percent) still attend institutions without on-campus childcare options.”

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While some campuses do offer their own childcare services, they are in the minority—and only scratch the surface of student needs. An oft-cited 2011 study notes there are fewer than 55,000 slots for on-campus childcare nationwide, less than 5 percent of the estimated need; a more recent 2019 GAO study says the majority of undergraduates (60 percent) still attend institutions without on-campus childcare options.<sup>18</sup>

The U.S. Education Department has increased funding for grants to institutions to support on-campus childcare in recent years. Everett, for example, operates an early learning center serving children ages 1-5 and uses its federal Child Care Access Means Parents In School (CCAMPIS) grant to waive childcare fees and offer parenting classes for low-income student parents. Almost 80 percent of CCAMPIS participants are female, and a majority of

female CCAMPIS (53 percent) participants attended two-year institutions. However, 4,200 children of student parents at institutions participating in CCAMPIS were on waiting lists to receive assistance nationwide in 2016-17, according to the 2019 GAO report.

Other institutions focus on referring students to licensed childcare facilities and connecting them with other funding sources, including state and local social services programs that subsidize or cover their costs, such as Pennsylvania’s KEYS program and CARE in California. And some institutions, including Austin Community College (ACC), offer students a range of on- and off-campus options depending on need and individual preferences. ACC provides childcare scholarships that are part of a range of wraparound services for low-income parents, an on-campus lab school that includes evening care, and drop-in care offered in partnership with a local YMCA. ACC students who receive childcare scholarships are 5 percent more likely to persist semester-to-semester than all students.<sup>19</sup>

When advising student mothers, it’s also important to ask them to think about what Mulvihill calls “back up childcare”—what options they have if their child is sick or a daycare center is closed when classes are scheduled.

- **Assessing the impact of services for student mothers.** A key element of offering personalized supports for all students, including student mothers, is measuring the impact of the services delivered. Doing so ensures that services are meeting the needs of the specific student populations they are targeting and requires intentional efforts to improve data collection and analysis of service delivery.

## Addressing gender inequities and promoting socioeconomic mobility

The dramatic gaps in attainment facing student mothers are, at their heart, a gender equity issue with real-world impacts on career opportunities and future income for both the mother and her children. Women continue to earn less than their male peers—82 cents for every dollar earned by men in 2018, with the effect more pronounced in middle-skill occupations, where women earn only 66 percent of what all workers do in jobs mainly done by men.<sup>20</sup>

When student mothers earn degrees, they and their families have greater socioeconomic opportunities. As with other women, more attention needs to be paid to equity in program placement and ensuring that all women, including student mothers, have exposure to careers in industries where they have been historically underrepresented. For student mothers, there's an added, multigenerational nuance to equity efforts: ensuring that their children, too, have access to postsecondary educational opportunities. Among the strategies targeting student mothers:

- **Services addressing women's needs.** Since 1988, Lorain County Community College (LCCC) in Ohio has offered a program called Women's Link, which provides counseling, crisis intervention, legal and housing services, and short-term emergency loans, along with referrals to other agencies. Women's Link's thirty-year track record of providing services to support women has been brought to scale in LCCC's new Advocacy and Resource Center (ARC), bringing the connective services of Women's Link to scale for all students and integrating this program model with the Commodore Cupboard food pantry, CARE (Center for Addiction and Recovery), and expanded community resources. The campus also has created mothers' rooms and private restrooms. On a more basic level, PCCUA stocked women's restrooms with sanitary napkins in response to student needs.
- **Program and career placement.** Opportunity gaps have long-term implications on career opportunities and future income for student mothers and their families. Career planning and counseling represents

an important starting point. PCCUA, for example, requires all students to complete an individual career plan, and deans and department chairs prominently post average wages for careers in their fields. Other institutions emphasize women and other underserved populations in entrepreneurship programs. Madison Area Technical College's Center for Entrepreneurship, for example, emphasizes women and minority entrepreneurs and has a formal partnership with WiSys, the University of Wisconsin system's technology transfer program, which provides additional resources to help protect intellectual property and commercialize products.

- **Two-generation strategies.** Providing and connecting student mothers to services has a direct impact on the wellbeing of their children. But colleges also can provide opportunities for the next generation of prospective students to gain early exposure to education. Housatonic, for example, emphasizes "Kids on Campus," programming that brings parents' children to activities on campus that familiarize them with the college setting. Everett partners with the Washington State Family and Community Engagement Trust to offer free two-generation programming. The Parent Leadership Training Institute and the Children's Leadership Training Institute, which are held at the same time so parents and children can attend together, focus on helping parents navigate systems and become more civically engaged; graduates of the 11-week program often go on to enroll in college classes.<sup>21</sup>

At Alamo Colleges in Texas, a parent-child scholarship program in place for more than two decades provides financial and other supports for parents while they are seeking a certificate or degree, but also promises recipients who complete their program of study a full two-year tuition scholarship for their children under six. Since the program's inception in 1997, 281 parents have attained their educational goals—and 32 of their children went on to claim scholarships more than a decade later.<sup>22</sup>

# Conclusion

While student mothers face significant challenges, they often are resilient, persistent, and determined to make better lives for themselves and their children. Everett President Willis says what kept her going was, “the amount of people who told me I couldn’t do it. Back then when you told Daria she couldn’t do something, she made it her mission to prove that person wrong. She got tired of people telling her what she should and shouldn’t do. There were so many people who said, “No you can’t.” OK, I’ll show you, yes I can.”

When provided with proper supports, single mothers—who are at much higher risk of not completing—can break the cycle of failure and attain their goals. Both Housatonic and PCCUA report stronger outcomes in areas such as persistence and completion for student mothers in their holistic support programs than the student body as a whole. Across Arkansas, more than half (52 percent) of the nearly 30,000 low-income participants enrolled in the Career Pathways initiative at Arkansas community colleges between 2006 and 2013 graduated with a degree or certificate—more than double the 24 percent completion rate of all Arkansas community college students.<sup>23</sup>

For these students, education represents a critical first step in reclaiming lives that have been upended, in some cases by domestic violence, according to PCCUA’s King:

*Many of our students are facing things that are not in their control. They may be in a state of crisis—a bill comes in that was higher than expected. Once they enroll in school, with the external supports we can provide, sometimes they recognize that the school part is something they can control. Suddenly, we see transformation and leadership in our community among those who have gone through the program, graduated, and been placed in a job.*

Although student mothers often require specific supports—childcare chief among them for many—it’s important to remember that they face the same challenges all students face, and reforms that simplify the process of navigating the college for all students will help them reach their own academic goals more quickly. deCastro, for example, completed her associate degree at Housatonic in 2 1/2 years—not overly long by

conventional community college metrics, but still wasted time to her perspective:

*It took an extra semester because I didn’t get the proper advice about classes specific to my degree. I wound up taking only one class the last semester. FESP told me exactly what I needed. If it wasn’t for them, it may have taken even longer. People take for granted everyone knows that information, but that wasn’t true for me. They didn’t act like you were from a different planet. They were really interested in your life and how they can help you and get you to where you want to get to. It was a very big confidence booster for me.*

Colleges must be intentional about identifying the needs of student mothers as they design and implement holistic student supports that improve outcomes for all students. Doing so requires identifying student mothers and the services that best serve their individual needs, which may vary from campus to campus—and mother to mother.

“Although we plan, we have learned that sometimes we need to be flexible, willing to toss what isn’t working, and always look for better ways of doing the work we do with adult women with dependent children.” PCCUA leaders wrote in their ATD Community College Women Succeed survey.

At the same time, the rewards are significant, and not just for the students currently enrolled at the institution. As Welton puts it, “My kids tell everybody, ‘My mom’s going to school.’ They’re going straight to college.”<sup>24</sup>

*Other briefs in this series examine how colleges are supporting the success of other student populations that have been historically underserved by higher education, including transitioning and part-time students, and disconnected youth.*

## Endnotes

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