

'SETTING A PATH FOR OUR KIDS AND OUR FUTURE':

Support for Student Parents at the Austin
Community College District Student
Advocacy Center



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Photos courtesy of Austin Community College

‘SETTING A PATH FOR OUR KIDS AND OUR FUTURE’:

Support for Student Parents at the Austin Community College District Student Advocacy Center

The first high school graduate in her family, Cynthia Benitez Hernandez stopped out of courses at Austin Community College (ACC) when she got pregnant. “It wasn’t a possibility,” she says. Then at 34, she found herself living in a single bedroom with her son and realized that working full-time at low-wage jobs would never be enough to improve their lives.

“I had a car payment, rent to pay, food to put on the table and a son. I was going to be in a cycle and not be able to break out of it,” she says. “I wanted to do something meaningful and purposeful.”

In similar fashion, Malia Capers-Cristabol had taken a break from college to take care of her ailing father. After becoming a parent two years later, she made a promise to both her father and her daughter that she would go back to school to provide a better life for her daughter, and that she’d do so to pursue a career that would allow her to care for those in need of care like her father.

“Having a child,” she says, “changed everything.”

Today, both women are enrolled full-time in ACC’s nursing program, with their sights on becoming RNs. For both, doing so would not have been possible without resources provided by the college—support for childcare and other financial needs, as well as coaching and connections to community resources that are allowing both women to reach their goals.

“We’re setting a path for our kids and their future,” Benitez Hernandez says.

ABOUT THIS PAPER

This case study is part of ATD’s Community College Women Succeed initiative, which aims to identify and promote effective strategies that help adult women students succeed in community college. You can learn more about this initiative on ATD’s website.

A LONG HISTORY OF SUPPORTING STUDENT PARENTS

With 11 campuses and 25 learning centers serving more than 35,000 for-credit and approximately 15,000 non-credit students across an area roughly the size of Connecticut, the Austin Community College District was first named an ATD Leader College in 2013 and earned Leader College of Distinction status in 2019. Its commitment to serving student parents goes back decades.

What was first called the Women's Center first opened in 1992, offering assistance with childcare and textbooks. Today, between 20 and 25 percent of ACC's enrollment—roughly 7,000-10,000 students—are student parents, and over the years, the college's efforts to support them have evolved into the Student Advocacy Center, which now also offers robust case management, coordination of community resources, and coaching support for student parents of both genders and other economically marginalized students on every ACC campus.

"The case management support that student advocates provide is real, robust, ongoing, problem-solving, and focused on students and student parents who are balancing their academic and personal lives," says Steven Christopher, associate vice chancellor of student accessibility and social support resources. "We think this kind of programming is rising to the top in the community college space, and we feel we have the wind to our back."



INTENTIONAL CONNECTIONS

The Student Advocacy Center offices on each of ACC's 11 campuses have one thing in common: Each is covered with photos of the children of the students each advocate works with, as well as wedding and graduation invitations. It's a highly visible sign of the college's intentional efforts to foster a sense of connection and belonging.



Student advocates who work in each center have degrees and experience in counseling, case management, and social work. They center their efforts around the body of research that has consistently demonstrated the impact of a relationship with a trusted member of the staff on student success, as well as the local context that often shapes student interactions with the college. "In Texas, there's generally a culture of 'I can do it myself, pull myself up by the bootstraps,'" says Christopher. "It's definitely an undercurrent for appropriate help-seeking behavior."

Along with serving student parents, advocates support young adults who have aged out of the foster care system and low-income students supported through community-based programs, but "parents get the bulk of their time," says Angelica Cancino de Sandoval, director of special supports and grants. Ninety percent of student parents served are women, most of whom are single mothers, but some male parents also receive services. Workloads vary across campuses and by enrollment levels, but on average, each advocate has a caseload of between 100 and 200 students.



Student parents who qualify for services meet with their campus advocate, who conducts an assessment interview covering a wide range of topics, including the student’s academic goals, home-life challenges, and any urgent or crisis needs, such as housing or food insecurity.

Goal-setting is a key to the advocate-student relationship. Students set goals for the semester—such as getting As or Bs—or their studies—such as graduating with a nursing degree or transferring to a four-year institution. They also set longer-term goals for themselves and their children, including spending more time with their families or entering a career with a stable income that allows them to afford to buy a home. Advocates then help translate those goals into concrete steps, such as visiting the tutoring center or creating a rainy day savings fund.

Advocates also coordinate services provided by ACC, social services agencies, and community organizations, including childcare and textbook scholarships, emergency assistance including utility assistance through a partnership with the City of Austin, assistance applying for state benefits (TANF, SNAP, CHIP, Medicaid and others), sexual and reproductive health programming in collaboration with Healthy Futures of Texas, and referrals to college and community resources for food, housing, legal, medical, and mental health. “I tell students I may not know the answer for every need, but I’ll try to figure it out,” says Amber Huffman, student advocate on ACC’s Eastview campus.

For many student parents, support for childcare is the most critical of these services—particularly for those like Benitez Hernandez and Capers-Cristabol



whose nursing program extends beyond traditional working hours. The college offers day and evening programs through its on-campus Children’s Lab School staffed by ACC faculty, staff, and students. Student parents also can use their childcare scholarship to select any state licensed or registered provider. Many who receive the benefit are using childcare for the first time.

For Capers-Cristabob, who was able to enroll her child in the on-campus lab school, ACC funding reduced the cost of childcare from \$1,100 to \$80 a month. “That allowed me to pay my bills on time, fill my fridge, and get gas weekly,” she says. “I needed that quarter tank of gas to get to class.”

Advocates also help student parents coordinate services beyond the college. Benitez Hernandez lives in housing provided by the Jeremiah Program, a national organization that seeks to disrupt generational poverty and systemic racism two generations at a time by focusing on the mother’s vision for her future and the education of her children. The Jeremiah Program requires participants to be working towards a degree. “They have a lot of support and connections to ACC, so it made the transition easier,” she says.

After making immediate connections to services and programs, advocates meet with student parents at least monthly. These check-ins focus on how students are doing in and out of class and whether additional resources or supports are needed. “I consider it more like a partnership because I feel she does so much,” Capers-Cristabob says of her advocate, who also coordinated a campus-wide effort to collect gifts for participating students’ children during the holidays.

MOVING FORWARD

Childcare scholarships and other services offered through the Student Advocacy Center only support a small portion of ACC's student parents. Eligibility requirements (zero estimated family contribution in federal student aid calculations) limit participants to those with the greatest need. Some eligible parents also opt out of some or all services. But the greatest challenge for ACC has involved identifying and encouraging student parents to seek support, which requires constant efforts to build awareness of the services available to them, including during enrollment and student life events, in the master syllabus, classroom visits, and in a new orientation session required for most students.

"We're waving the flag," says de Sandoval.

The pandemic posed unique challenges for student parents, who had to adjust to remote learning as college classrooms and many childcare and aftercare centers closed. ACC student advocates continued to support parents by shifting counseling to Zoom—a practice which continued after campuses reopened because of its convenience for busy student parents.

Childcare costs have increased substantially in the wake of the pandemic as centers continue to limit the number of children in each classroom. ACC has adjusted funding formulas to meet the rapid increase in childcare costs.





In collaboration with United Way for Greater Austin, the college is also piloting a more ambitious support—a guaranteed student income program, which provides a \$500 monthly stipend for eligible student parents enrolled in at least nine credit hours. The intent, says Christopher, is to reduce students’ reliance on second or third jobs—80 percent of all ACC students work at least part-time, and student parents are believed to be overrepresented in that figure. Preliminary data from the pilot shows that student parents receiving the stipend are completing more courses and have higher GPAs than their counterparts receiving only the childcare subsidy. “We expect over the long term the data will show it has a deep impact on students,” Christopher says.

For many student parents, the impact of ACC’s intentional supports has already been felt. Over the summer, Capers-Cristablol made the decision to quit her full-time job to focus more fully on her accelerated nursing program at ACC—a decision made feasible through her participation in the guaranteed student income program. “I’ve been working since I was 14. I’ve never not had a job and not been able to support myself,” she says. “I wouldn’t have been able to do that without my advocate.”

Ahead of completing the RN program this spring, Capers-Cristablol has been focused on giving back through the student honor society Phi Theta Kappa, which is creating a resource center to address food and transportation security for a broader subset of ACC students, and by supporting her classmates in the accelerated nursing program, most of whom are parents like her.

“To make the decision to become a nurse during the pandemic was a huge decision,” she says. “It’s forced us to be creative. You find your community to stay connected.”

KEYS TO SUCCESS—AND ONE PERSISTENT CHALLENGE

Among the critical elements of ACC's approach to serving student parents:

The case management model. Placing at least one student advocate on each of ACC's 11 campuses has proven critical for building relationships and connecting students with resources both on and off-campus. "Having someone who can talk about SNAP benefit applications and knows about resources in the community and who can be there as a person to go to is very important," says Huffman.

Institutional commitment to serving student parents, which has proven particularly critical for childcare subsidies. "It's not a light lift," says Christopher, noting that the college spends more than \$500,000 a year on a relatively small student population—the student parents who qualify as very low income based on their FAFSA.

A visible point of contact. ACC allocated space for a Student Advocacy Center on each of its campuses. Such centers need to be "public, visible, and welcoming for student parents and other students in need," Christopher says.

Dedicated childcare options and partnerships. ACC operates a lab school staffed by faculty, staff, and students. The college is currently actively seeking additional childcare options for students through community partnerships. It also provides students with information about licensed childcare providers and Head Start/pre-K programs, additional funding sources, and programs for children with special needs.

Recognizing local resources. Because of the district's large service area that spans multiple jurisdictions, ACC's student advocates must identify resources close to each campus—and help students find ways to access them. "We'll drive to these places to find out how someone gets in," says Allegra Harris, special supports and grants coordinator.

Identifying eligible students. Identifying student parents to make them aware of available services and track the impact of targeted student success efforts has proven difficult at ACC and other institutions. "We've wrestled with how to get that data accurately for years," Christopher says. Many institutions don't ask students to identify whether they are parents unless the information is required for specific programs, such as CTE and Perkins grant funding. At ACC, that means many students identify as parents only when they apply for services. Efforts to identify student parents creates internal debate. At ACC, for example, stakeholders have been reluctant to include questions about parenting during student registration or on general application forms because they fear too many questions may become a barrier to enrollment or registration. However, without a consistent process for identifying student parents facing the greatest challenges, "the student has to find us first," Cancino de Sandoval says. "We've offered services for over 25 years. It's something we still struggle with."





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