



Scaling Success for Parenting Students

A GUIDE

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Executive Summary

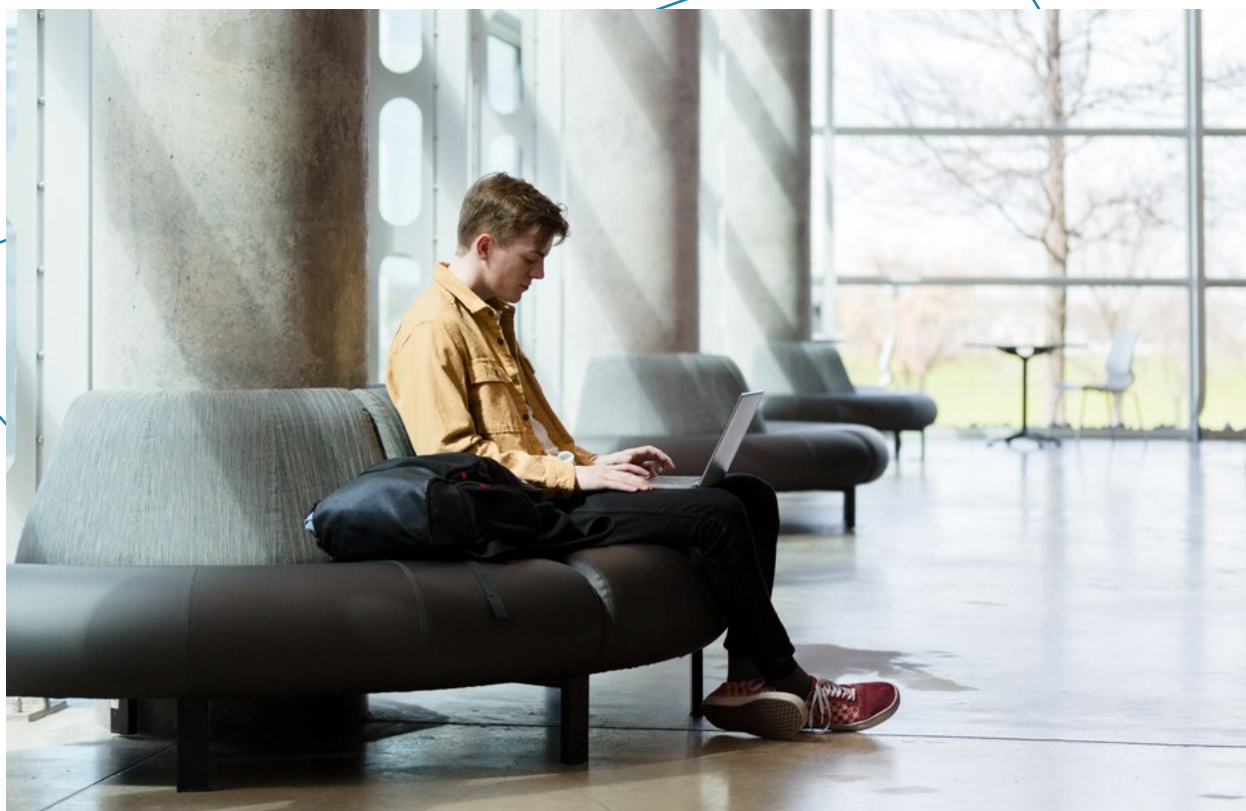
The guide provides some of the first institution-level evidence connecting specific institutional practices to improved outcomes for parenting students. Its cross-college practices are informed by research on parenting students, adult learners, basic needs, sense of belonging, institutional change, and student success and are further validated through implementation at seven community colleges across seven states. Representing rural, urban, and suburban communities and institutions of varying enrollment sizes, these colleges participated in two Achieving the Dream-led cohorts, offering valuable insights into practices that can be adapted across diverse institutional contexts.

Parenting students bring resilience, resourcefulness, determination, and a proven ability to balance complex responsibilities. Institutions are strengthening their capacity to identify and better understand the experiences and needs of parenting students, coordinate supports that build on their strengths, and create intentional pathways to success both inside and outside the classroom.



Resources

- [Full Guide](#)
- [Cross-College Practices and Recommendations](#)
- [Cross-College Practices Implementation Self-Assessment](#)
Assess current implementation across the seven practices, identify priorities, and align next steps
- Institution Spotlights:
 - [Austin Community College \(TX\)](#)
 - [Bakersfield College \(CA\)](#)
 - [North Arkansas College of the University of Arkansas \(UA Northark\) \(AR\)](#)
 - [Patrick & Henry Community College \(VA\)](#)
 - [Pierce College \(WA\)](#)
 - [Roane State Community College \(TN\)](#)



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I. Introduction

Why Parenting Students Matter

Parenting students represent a significant portion of the community college population, and their success is essential to expanding educational and economic opportunity for their families, communities, and future generations. More than one in four community college students has dependent children, yet many institutions are not fully equipped to meet their needs (Achieving the Dream, 2025c). Parenting students' experiences are shaped by intersecting identities. The majority of parenting students are adult learners, which means strategies that support adult learner success, such as flexibility, belonging, clear pathways, and coordinated supports, are central to improving outcomes for this population. At community and technical colleges specifically, 87% of parenting students are 25 and older and 70% are women (Anderson, Gittens, & Westaby, 2024). More broadly, among all undergraduate parenting students, 55% are students of color and 48% are first-generation college students (Anderson et al., 2024). Their experiences reflect the broader need for institutions to better understand who their students are and how intersecting identities shape access, persistence, and completion (Achieving the Dream, 2021; Achieving the Dream, 2025c).



For this guide, parenting students are defined as students enrolled in education or training who are concurrently responsible for, or imminently will be responsible for, providing care for a child of any age. This includes biological parents, stepparents, unmarried coparents, adoptive parents, foster parents, guardians, grandparents, extended family members, and sibling caregivers (Sick & Anderson, 2025). Parenting students are central to the mission of community colleges, yet institutional systems have not always been designed with their realities in mind.

Parenting students are highly motivated to succeed, pursuing education to improve economic mobility for themselves and their families (Dundar, 2025). At the same time, they are navigating systems that often do not reflect the realities of balancing coursework, employment, and caregiving responsibilities.



Colleges often lack consistent approaches to identifying parenting students in their data, which limits their ability to understand needs, design supports, and assess impact at scale. Institutional policies related to attendance, scheduling, and financial aid, combined with fragmented or difficult-to-navigate supports, can create barriers that are misaligned with students' lives rather than reflective of their capabilities. Strengthening data collection and centering student experiences is important in designing more responsive systems (Achieving the Dream, 2021, 2025c).

These deficiencies and misalignments have substantive consequences for student outcomes, particularly in long-term economic mobility. Six years after enrolling in a community college, only 4.6% of student parents earn a bachelor's degree, compared with 13.9% of non-parenting students (Dundar, 2025). Because bachelor's degrees are associated with substantially higher lifetime earnings and access to a greater share of family-sustaining jobs, improving attainment for parenting students is critical to advancing economic mobility across generations. As Ann Slaughter, director of child development centers and family advocacy at Pierce College, reflected, "Bringing children onto campus, having them see their parents attend school and graduate, sets the tone for them. They're learning that this is what they can do, too."



The Benefits of Action

Visibility for parenting students in data, planning, policy, and practice helps colleges advance student success goals while expanding opportunity for families and strengthening community vibrancy. Supporting parenting students is not only a student success strategy; it is a strategy for advancing economic mobility and expanding opportunity across generations (Dundar, 2025; Anderson et al., 2024).

Flexible, coordinated, and easy-to-navigate systems help colleges strengthen persistence, accelerate completion, and expand pathways to family-sustaining employment for parenting students, many of whom are also adult learners. This includes attention to internships, clinical placements, apprenticeships, and other work-based learning experiences, where childcare, transportation, scheduling, and financial barriers can shape whether parenting students are



able to participate. When colleges support parenting students to persist and complete, the benefits extend well beyond the individual. Earning a credential strengthens students' access to family-sustaining employment, increases lifetime earnings potential, and contributes to greater economic stability for their families.

Many parenting students also navigate significant financial responsibilities while enrolled, with 78% reporting financial difficulties during college, and most of those who rely on credit cards to make ends meet are unable to pay off their balances each month (Niznik, Fletcher, & Barone, 2022). Supports that help students move toward completion can reduce the risk of accumulating debt without the credential that makes repayment more manageable. These investments also shape children's futures. Research consistently shows that parental educational attainment is one of the strongest predictors of children's future educational outcomes, meaning that every parenting student who completes represents an opportunity for not only one student but for their family and future generations (Dundar, 2025; Achieving the Dream, 2025c).

Designing for parenting students strengthens outcomes for all students and advances broader institutional and community goals. Student-centered systems strengthen colleges' capacity to improve access, persistence, and completion for a broader range of learners. Throughout this guide, examples from participating colleges illustrate what becomes possible when institutions align their systems with students' strengths, responsibilities, and goals.



Guide Purpose and Design

PURPOSE

Scaling Success for Parenting Students builds on Achieving the Dream's (ATD's) *Knowing Our Students: Parenting Students* by translating insight into action. Drawing on evidence from two multi-year ATD cohorts of seven colleges, it illustrates how colleges are implementing, sustaining, and scaling evidence-informed approaches that drive institutional transformation and systems change to improve outcomes for parenting students and their families.



Synthesizing learnings from ATD's two parenting student cohorts, supported by philanthropic investments from ECMC Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, this guide advances our understanding of how community colleges design, implement, and sustain efforts that improve outcomes for parenting students. The guide serves both as a reflection of collective progress within the participating colleges and as a roadmap for other institutions seeking to strengthen outcomes for student parents through evidence-based, field-informed, and student-centered practice.

This guide is designed to support the collaborative, institution-wide efforts needed to create the conditions for parenting students to thrive and succeed and offers detailed guidance for how different audiences can use it, which appears in the [How To Use This Guide](#) section. This guide draws on the work of participating colleges and highlights the realities and implications of seven cross-college practices that strengthen support for parenting students.

GUIDING CROSS-COLLEGE PRACTICES

The guide explores seven cross-college institutional practices that helped institutions create conditions for parenting students to build early momentum, experience a stronger sense of belonging, and gain access to meaningful support to persist toward their educational goals.

1. Use Dynamic Data To Identify, Understand, and Act
2. Increase Institutional Awareness Through Professional Learning
3. Adopt Supportive Institutional Policies and Practices
4. Foster Connection and Sense of Belonging
5. Expand or Scale Holistic Supports
6. Align and Embed Parenting Student Success Efforts Within Institutional Priorities
7. Build and Strengthen Strategic Partnerships

OUTCOMES ACROSS PARTICIPATING COLLEGES

Across seven participating colleges, implementation resulted in a consistent pattern of institutional change and positive student outcomes, including improved persistence, meaning students' continued enrollment at their college, consistent with each college's institutional data on year-over-year re-enrollment. Persistence is a leading indicator of long-term completion (Belfield, Jenkins, & Fink, 2019).



INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

- **Parenting students became more visible.** Colleges expanded identification strategies and strengthened the use of institutional data to better understand parenting students and inform decision-making.
- **Institutional approaches became more coordinated.** Colleges aligned policies, practices, professional learning, partnerships, and supports to strengthen institution-wide approaches to parenting student success.
- **Parenting student success became embedded in institutional practice.** Colleges integrated parenting student success into institutional priorities and used student voice, local context, and continuous assessment to refine and sustain their work over time.

STUDENT OUTCOMES

- **Improved parenting student persistence.** Participating colleges documented improvements in parenting student persistence within their institutional contexts.
- **Stronger persistence among students participating in focused supports.** Participating colleges documented stronger persistence outcomes among parenting students who engaged with targeted supports.
- **Increased use of parenting student resources and supports.** Participating colleges documented increased use of parenting student resources, including expanded use of food pantries and support services.

The institutional spotlights in the guide illustrate these changes and student outcomes. Readers can see how this work took shape in specific college contexts. Each spotlight includes What the Data Show and What Practitioners Should Consider.

Austin Community College (TX)
Bakersfield College (CA)
North Arkansas College of the
University of Arkansas (AR)

Patrick & Henry Community College (VA)
Pierce College (WA)
Roane State Community College (TN)

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide draws on college interviews, multi-year coaching engagements, and a multi-year Community of Practice that brought together practitioners and leaders from across both cohorts to share progress, work through challenges, and build collective knowledge. Integrating field-based insights from coaching practice with synthesis of the broader research and evidence base, it is designed for the range of people who shape conditions for parenting student success.



Each section of this guide features college examples, cross-college insights, and practical guidance to help readers:

- Reflect on institutional progress and next steps
- Develop a cross-functional action plan that identifies goals, responsible parties, timelines, resource needs, and measures of progress
- Apply practices within the local context
- Spark cross-department and partner dialogue focused on student experiences
- Inform planning, budgeting, and policy alignment

OTHER GUIDING FRAMEWORK, PRINCIPLES, AND RESOURCES

This guide draws on ATD's Community Vibrancy Framework, Institutional Capacity Framework and Assessment Tool (ICAT), and change leadership principles to connect parenting student success with broader institutional transformation. Together, these frameworks help colleges move from isolated supports to coordinated, student-centered systems that strengthen access, momentum, mobility, and community vibrancy.

- **Community Vibrancy Framework:** ATD's theory of change defining institutional success across four dimensions: Access, Momentum, Mobility, and Vibrancy. This guide aligns with that framework by showing how strengthening support for parenting students can advance institutional outcomes, economic mobility, and broader community well-being.
- **Institutional Capacity Framework and Assessment Tool (ICAT):** ATD's framework for assessing and building the organizational capacities colleges need to drive and sustain student success, including organizational agility and disciplined implementation.
- **Change Leadership:** Principles that help colleges adapt policies, processes, and services — such as scheduling, advising, and communication — so they work well for students who are also caregivers.
- **Cross-College Practices:** Practices grounded in credible research, validated in the field, and translatable for practice.



II. An Investment in Parenting Student Success

Building on a Foundation of Field Learning

The work documented in this guide builds on years of deliberate investment. ATD's engagement with parenting students began with the Community College Women Succeed initiative, a storytelling campaign launched in 2019–20 that brought the experiences of parenting students, and the colleges working to serve them, to a national audience. That campaign surfaced the scale and urgency of the challenge and led to the formation of the Community College Women Succeed Advisory Group and a research agenda that elevated the need to better understand and support parenting students as a field-wide priority.

That foundation informed College Success for Single Mothers, a three-year initiative funded by ECMC Foundation from 2020 to 2022 with the National College Transition Network and PERG Learning. Eight community colleges participated, developed action plans, and expanded key practices and services to support student success in college and careers (National College Transition Network, 2020). The initiative demonstrated measurable progress across six areas: visibility, supports, family-friendly spaces, community building, policy review, and data systems (Goodman, Osche, & Hatch, 2023).

From that experience, and with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, ATD developed the Student Parent Opportunity Assessment, and tested it with an initial four-college cohort. The diagnostic tool helps colleges understand who their parenting students are, identify institutional strengths and gaps, and launch aligned action plans with greater speed and focus. With that assessment in place, ATD launched two multi-year cohorts, Scaling Supports for Parenting Students, funded by ECMC Foundation, and Scaling Parenting Student Practices, funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, bringing together seven colleges committed to translating what they learned into lasting institutional change. This guide documents what those colleges built and what the field can learn from their experience.



TWO COHORTS, ONE SHARED PURPOSE

ATD's parenting student work is organized into two cohorts that represent a sustained, multi-year investment in institutional change.

1. Scaling Supports for Parenting Students, launched in September 2023, was a three-year initiative bringing together four colleges: Austin Community College (TX), Florida State College at Jacksonville (FL), UA Northark (AR), and Pierce College (WA). This cohort focused on helping colleges translate findings from the Student Parent Opportunity Assessment into concrete action plans and measurable goals, with dedicated coaching support to guide implementation (Achieving the Dream, 2024a).
2. Scaling Parenting Student Practices launched in June 2024 as a two-year effort with three colleges: Bakersfield College (CA), Patrick & Henry Community College (VA), and Roane State Community College (TN). Building on the first cohort's foundation, the cohort focused on scaling promising practices and deepening institutional commitment (Achieving the Dream, 2024a).

Across both cohorts, colleges share a common goal: to design, implement, and sustain evidence-informed approaches that improve outcomes for parenting students and their families.

DATA, COACHING, AND SHARED LEARNING

Each college in both cohorts completed the Student Parent Opportunity Assessment, a multi-day, coach-facilitated process. The assessment draws on five activities: background research, listening sessions, a resource inventory, a Knowing Our Students workshop, and a leadership report that translates findings into institutional priorities (Achieving the Dream, 2025a).

The assessment consistently surfaced insights that colleges had not anticipated. At Florida State College at Jacksonville, leaders discovered that their parenting student population was nearly twice the size of comparable colleges after previously relying on Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) data alone (Achieving the Dream, 2025a). At Roane State Community College, the assessment revealed that FAFSA data could only be used in aggregate, prompting the college to build a self-identification method into its student portal. At Pierce College, a review found that more than half of students had listed their family status as “unknown,” prompting the college to act rather than wait for cleaner data by opening a child-friendly space and building a Canvas module for parenting students (Achieving the Dream, 2025a, 2025d, 2025g).

This pattern was true across the cohorts: In each case, a single clear finding — the size of the population, a limitation in the data, or a gap in



what was known — was enough to identify a starting point and act on it. The assessment offered a strong foundation to act with intention while measurement and implementation develop together, reflecting ATD's ICAT capacities of organizational agility and disciplined implementation (Achieving the Dream, n.d.). As Ann Slaughter, director of child development centers and family advocacy at Pierce College, said, "Sometimes taking small steps matters more than waiting for the perfect time to take a big one" (Achieving the Dream, 2025g).

ATD coaches provided customized, ongoing support to help colleges build and translate action plans into practice and policy change, working alongside faculty and staff to build lasting capacity and align parenting student work with each college's broader institutional priorities.



LEARNING TOGETHER: THE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Peer learning was a central, intentional component of both cohorts. Alongside coaching, ATD convened a Community of Practice that met more than a dozen times, virtually and in person, with 15 or more representatives from cohort colleges at each session (Achieving the Dream, 2024a).

Sessions moved through a natural progression, from building shared understanding of parenting students' needs and using data to inform action to documenting what colleges had built, organized around peer sharing, problem-solving protocols, and practice spotlights where one college's innovation became a model others could adapt. Its value showed most in the connections built across institutions: As Lisa Steffensen, Ph.D., dean of students at Roane State Community College, put it, "It's been encouraging to see that we're not alone in the challenges we face" (Achieving the Dream, 2025d).

Scaling Parenting Student Success

Colleges participating in ATD's parenting student cohorts demonstrated that improving outcomes for parenting students requires more than expanding services. It requires translating insight into action and using data to refine and sustain that work over time through coordinated, institution-wide change.



Progress across the colleges reflects student-centered institutional learning within local contexts. Acting early did not mean acting without evidence. Colleges in both cohorts began acting on early findings from the Student Parent Opportunity Assessment, using the data sources, strategies, resources, and institutional capacity available to them, and refined their approaches as additional evidence became available.

Across the colleges, this approach produced a consistent pattern of institutional change: Parenting student work became more visible, more coordinated, and more embedded in institutional practice. Data systems improved, policies and supports became more responsive, and faculty and staff took part in professional learning and engaged in supportive practice.

Together, these changes reflect a shift from initiative-based efforts to integrated, ongoing practice. They show how colleges can become more responsive to parenting students, their families, and their communities. These colleges are anchor institutions. When parenting students persist in their studies, complete credentials, and move into careers where they earn at least family-sustaining wages, they strengthen their families and their communities. This impact extends across generations.



III. Cross-College Practices

Recurring and mutually reinforcing practices have emerged that demonstrate how institutions translate insight into action and sustain progress over time. These practices are grounded in research on parenting students, adult learners, basic needs, sense of belonging, institutional change, and student success; validated through implementation across diverse institutional contexts; and translatable for practice. Together they illustrate how colleges are strengthening early momentum for parenting students while building the capacity for sustained improvement.

1. Use Dynamic Data To Identify, Understand, and Act

Core Insight: Colleges strengthen access and early momentum when they use dynamic, meaning continuously updated and often multi-source, data to identify parenting students, understand their experiences and context, and inform timely action.

Cross-College Strategies and Examples

Colleges moved beyond single-source identification toward more complete integrated approaches that draw on surveys, administrative data, self-identification forms, child development center enrollment, and service utilization records. Because some of these sources may contain sensitive information or may have been collected for a different purpose, it is important to have clear consent, privacy, and data governance practices when integrating them. Strong governance limits access to appropriate personnel, defines appropriate use, protects student privacy, and guards against stigmatizing or punitive uses of sensitive information.

- At Roane State Community College, embedding a short self-identification question directly into the student account portal (“Are you caring for minor children in your home?”) significantly expanded the number of students identified and enabled earlier, more focused outreach.
- At UA Northark, the institution integrated FAFSA data with welcome (intake) survey data to build a more complete picture of its parenting student population.
- At Bakersfield College, institutional surveys revealed that 26–27% of students identified as parenting students, while FAFSA data captured only 11–12%, a gap that, once visible, became the basis for expanding institutional supports.
- At Pierce College, the institution cross-referenced child development center enrollment, a welcome survey, and Canvas course participation to identify parenting students across multiple touchpoints,



while also reframing the identification question itself: If parenting student supports are built into institutional systems that serve all students, the urgency of identification decreases.

- At Austin Community College, the institution integrated data from Salesforce, geographic heat maps, and daily enrollment flags to enable proactive, focused outreach across 11 campuses.
- At Florida State College at Jacksonville, several focus groups were conducted after more parenting students self-identified on the student climate survey. Many of these parenting students brought student voice directly into the college's understanding of their needs and priorities, shaping the strategies the college developed in response.

Cross-College Further Implication

Colleges discovered that identifying parenting students required intentional strategy and institutional alignment across data sources to identify this population more completely and to understand the impact of different supports. Sources to consider beyond FAFSA data include enrollment surveys, self-identification forms, child development center enrollment, and food pantry records.

2. Increase Institutional Awareness Through Professional Learning

Core Insight: Increasing institutional awareness helps ensure that parenting student needs are recognized and addressed consistently across academic and student-facing environments. Professional learning gives faculty and staff a shared understanding of the structural barriers parenting students face, including financial strain, time constraints, and caregiving responsibilities. This shared understanding supports more coordinated responses across the institution.

Cross-College Strategies and Examples

Colleges developed professional learning strategies that made parenting students visible to faculty and staff in ways that shifted both awareness and practice.

- At Austin Community College, ACCTV and Austin PBS led a joint initiative to produce a “Day in the Life” documentary following three parenting students through their days. When the chancellor personally facilitated a panel conversation with the featured students, the message from institutional leadership was clear: This population matters here. The episode became a faculty professional development tool that changed what instructors ask on the first day of class.



- At Pierce College, parenting student content was meaningfully included through All District Professional Days, individual department meetings, communities of practice, and a Faculty Mentor Canvas site that includes trauma-informed content specific to single parents, extending that learning through a parallel Inclusive Practices site that reaches the college as a whole.
- At Florida State College at Jacksonville, campus-wide efforts were implemented to build a shared understanding of parenting students, bringing faculty and staff into direct engagement with student experience through structured professional development and campus dialogue. A Parenting Student professional development course was created to share success, data, and input into how to better serve this group.

Cross-College Further Implication

Faculty are essential partners in creating welcoming, flexible learning environments for parenting students. When faculty are engaged through data, especially student narratives, and invited into shared problem-solving, they can use their expertise to shape classroom practices and norms that recognize parenting students' strengths, support their sense of belonging, and contribute to institution-wide cultural change.

Professional learning is most useful when it prepares faculty and staff to respond consistently to the responsibilities and experiences parenting students navigate, including childcare disruptions, child illness, school closures, pregnancy-related absences, basic needs concerns, and requests for flexible participation. Colleges can examine whether professional learning translates into changes in policies, classroom practices, referral patterns, and student experiences over time.

3. Adopt Supportive Institutional Policies and Practices

Core Insight: Institutional policies and classroom practices significantly shape early momentum. Reviewing and revising policies and practices related to attendance, pregnancy and childbirth-related absences, deadlines, satisfactory academic progress appeals, withdrawal and reentry, priority registration, scheduling, course formats, test proctoring, internships and clinical placements, lactation access, and campus access can help colleges reduce barriers and promote success for parenting students and others balancing coursework, work, and caregiving responsibilities. Because Title IX protections include pregnancy, childbirth, and related conditions, clear policies and consistent implementation also help ensure students receive appropriate support across academic and student-facing settings.



Cross-College Strategies and Examples

Colleges examined their written policies and found opportunities to align language with the belonging they were already working to create.

- At Pierce College, a cross-departmental working group revised the children-on-campus policy, changing the language from “not allowed” to “may be,” while STEM faculty added grace periods and free passes for absences.
- At UA Northark, the children-on-campus policy was developed through a structured participatory process that gathered input from parenting and non-parenting students alike before moving through formal governance and Board of Trustees approval.
- At Florida State College at Jacksonville, a cross-functional group has worked to update language that will be incorporated into the student handbook regarding children on campus. This will allow for more family-friendly spaces.
- At Patrick & Henry Community College, proctoring practices were adjusted to reduce barriers for parenting students.

Cross-College Further Implication

Supportive policy signals that parenting students belong and establishes a shared institutional commitment to their success. Supportive policy also improves clarity about what is allowed and provides a framework for accountability. Across the cohort, colleges that revised prohibitive language and developed policy through broadly consultative processes created clearer expectations for faculty and staff, while also recognizing and reinforcing the supportive practices already

emerging across campus. The value of these policies depends on consistent implementation: When policy remains only in handbooks rather than moving into everyday practice, parenting students’ experiences depend on which individuals they encounter rather than on what the institution has committed to. Colleges can pair policy changes with implementation guidance, faculty and staff communication, student-facing explanations, a clearly identified appeal or problem-resolution process, and periodic review of whether policies are applied consistently across departments.



4. Foster Connection and Sense of Belonging

Core Insight: Creating intentional opportunities for connection strengthens early momentum by increasing engagement and deepening parenting students' sense of belonging.

Colleges are developing both in-person and virtual opportunities for parenting students to connect with peers, access resources, and experience the institution as responsive to their lives.

Cross-College Strategies and Examples

Colleges designed connection strategies around where parenting students already spend time, how they access courses, and what makes participation feasible.

- At Pierce College, there were lactation pods, child-friendly corners in its library, and a Canvas shell for parenting students that helped them connect to resources and one another.
- At UA Northark and Roane State Community College, parenting student communities based in the learning management system (LMS) created connection points in the digital spaces already in use. When asked where they wanted to connect, students were direct: "That's where we live already as students."
- At Austin Community College, events were designed around school closure days and geographic heat maps showing where parenting students live, with post-event surveys confirming that students who attended felt more supported by the institution afterward.
- At Patrick & Henry Community College, a dedicated parenting student webpage consolidated supports in one accessible place.
- At Bakersfield College, an online map helps students locate family-friendly spaces and resources.
- Florida State College at Jacksonville was awarded the NEFLIN Innovation Grant, which was used to create family-friendly kits for children accompanying parents to library and tutoring locations. The kits were designed to provide age-appropriate educational and engaging materials, creating a welcoming, family-centered environment and allowing parenting students to focus on their studies while ensuring their children are engaged and supported.



Cross-College Further Implication

More than half of parenting students at cohort colleges were primarily or fully taking courses online rather than on campus, meaning traditional engagement strategies and campus-based support structures did not consistently reach them. Across the cohort, colleges created connection opportunities through the LMS, texting, virtual events, and financial aid communication channels. In-person events were designed around K–12 school closure days and where students live. Colleges also made physical campus changes like lactation pods, family-friendly spaces, tutoring center child corners, toys in advising offices, and family-friendly activities for students and their families to better reflect and support parenting students' experiences on campus.

5. Expand or Scale Holistic Supports

Core Insight: Expanding access to supports strengthens early momentum by reaching parenting students who are not eligible for targeted aid programs. Colleges can broaden access by extending food, housing, transportation, childcare, health and mental health, technology, public benefits navigation, emergency aid, advising, and family supports beyond program-specific eligibility requirements.

Cross-College Strategies and Examples

Colleges broadened access to supports so more parenting students could benefit.

- At Bakersfield College, a Parenting Student Liaison position and expanded food pantry helped parenting students access diapers, formula, and wipes without an eligibility screen.
- At Pierce College, an emergency grant exception for students with dependents and phone-accessible lactation pods reduced barriers to supports.
- At Austin Community College, childcare scholarships and community subsidy programs helped connect students to childcare resources.
- At Roane State Community College, the Kindness Closet stocked items that SNAP does not cover, including diapers, wipes, hygiene items, and school supplies.
- At UA Northark, students who applied for Career Pathways but did not qualify were assigned to proactive advising, and Pete's Pantry served students without an application or eligibility screen.
- At Florida State College at Jacksonville, there has been an increase in students' utilization of the FSCJ H.O.P.E. Food Pantry and tutoring services.



Cross-College Further Implications

When parenting students are served by support programs, their success improves. Eligibility requirements, by design, limit who those programs can serve. Examine administrative burden as well. Services may remain functionally inaccessible when students must complete lengthy applications, repeatedly document need, visit multiple offices, travel to campus, or explain their circumstances more than once. Dedicated liaison positions and institutional infrastructure that do not require eligibility screening can reach parenting students regardless of benefit status.

6. Align and Embed Parenting Student Success Efforts Within Institutional Priorities

Core Insight: Sustained impact requires aligning parenting student efforts with institutional goals and embedding them into existing structures and systems. Colleges strengthen the durability of this work when parenting student success is integrated into strategic plans, cross-functional teams, and core student success efforts.

Cross-College Strategies and Examples

Colleges embedded parenting student success into the structures that shape institutional priorities, accountability, and sustainability.

- At Austin Community College, meeting students' basic needs became one of four cornerstones of its Theory of Change, giving parenting student work structural legitimacy that does not depend on any individual advocate.
- At Roane State Community College, parenting student work aligned with three of the four components of its strategic plan.
- At Bakersfield College, parenting student initiatives were embedded in its Vision 2030 and 2025–28 Student Equity Plan, with cross-functional workgroups to guide implementation and sustain progress.



- At Patrick & Henry Community College, college leadership described the work as “a natural extension of our student success work,” aligned with all three of the college’s strategic pillars.
- At Pierce College, a key staff role was restructured to include family advocacy, transforming individual commitment into an institutional job description.
- At UA Northark, the Board of Trustees’ approval for its children-on-campus policy placed parenting student support within the institution’s formal governance structure.

Cross-College Further Implication

Sustainable impact requires aligning parenting student efforts with institutional goals and embedding them into existing structures. Parenting student success efforts are more durable when they are connected to institutional priorities that colleges are already working to advance.

7. Build and Strengthen Strategic Partnerships

Core Insight: Strategic partnerships extend colleges’ capacity to support parenting students’ academic, career, basic needs, and family responsibilities. These partnerships are strongest when colleges and partners align services, share insights, and maintain the relationships needed to improve outcomes over time.

Cross-College Strategies and Examples

Colleges built and deepened partnerships that extended their capacity to serve parenting students beyond what any single office could sustain.

- At Patrick & Henry Community College, partnerships with childcare providers and community-based organizations supported outreach to parenting students in both degree and non-degree programs.
- At Austin Community College, partnerships with Austin PBS and the UT Austin LBJ School helped make parenting students’ experiences visible and involved events designed around students’ lives, while connections to community food resources and childcare subsidy programs expanded access to supports.
- At Pierce College, attendees of a statewide convening and a subsequent webinar series helped extend family-friendly campus practices across Washington, with the Washington Student Achievement Council supporting statewide data collection efforts.
- At Bakersfield College, childcare partnerships are sustained as part of its Vision 2030 commitments.



Cross-College Further Implication

The relationships, institutional knowledge, and trust that college personnel earn with parenting students and community partners are valuable. Strategic partnerships are more effective and, over time, more efficient when colleges and partners align supports and services, share data and insights, and work together to improve outcomes over time. That alignment depends on clear partnership structure, including named contacts, current eligibility and service information, agreed-upon referral procedures, capacity checks, student consent, data-sharing protections, and a process for confirming whether students successfully connect with services.

Together, these practices illustrate how colleges are translating insight into sustained action by strengthening early momentum and building institutional capacity over time. While individual strategies may vary, the most effective efforts are those that are coordinated and collaborative, aligned with institutional priorities, and continuously refined based on student experience and outcomes. The practices are mutually reinforcing and most impactful when implemented as part of a broader, integrated approach to student success.



IV. Recommendations by Practitioners

Improving outcomes for parenting students requires coordinated action across roles, each with different responsibilities, decision-making authority, and points of interaction with students. The following recommendations center on the needs and experiences of parenting students while reflecting how administrators, faculty, staff, and partners can contribute within their respective roles. Across roles, institutions should engage parenting students not only as recipients of support but as contributors to the design, assessment, and refinement of the holistic supports intended to serve them. These recommendations are grounded in the work of cohort colleges and reflect the cross-college practices and implications that emerged across the cohort.

Align Institutional Priorities

ADMINISTRATORS AND SENIOR LEADERSHIP

Alignment is an institutional decision, not a program decision. The choices that make parenting student work sustainable, such as establishing position descriptions, budget lines, strategic plan language, governance structures, and investment in professional learning, are administrative decisions. Administrators also identify which services require eligibility screening and where the college has discretion to broaden access. Faculty can practice flexibility individually; only administrators can move that flexibility from informal accommodation to institutional expectation. Senior leaders shape the conditions that determine how effectively the college can respond to student needs through the priorities they set, the resources they allocate, and the systems and expectations they establish across the institution. Include parenting students in policy review, strategic planning, and governance conversations that affect their access to courses, services, campus spaces, and basic needs supports.

1. Designate a named person whose role includes helping parenting students find and connect to supports. Liaison positions can be anchored in institution-level infrastructure, rather than program eligibility. Review job descriptions for roles that interact most frequently with parenting students and make support for parenting students explicit.
2. Align parenting student efforts with institutional priorities and ensure coordination across divisions, reducing fragmentation in how supports are designed and delivered.



3. Audit current policy language for framing that may exclude parenting students and convene a working group to align that language with the institution's stated values. For example, the group might audit policies and then align attendance and absence policies to acknowledge parenting-related disruptions, such as child illness, school closures, and childcare breakdowns, as predictable realities. This does not require eliminating attendance standards; it requires being explicit about where flexibility is appropriate. Review registration policies and practices to determine whether parenting students can receive earlier access to course registration. California provides priority registration to student parents through state policy, and other colleges can explore whether institutional policy or governance processes allow similar registration access.
4. Map current parenting student services by eligibility requirements and identify which are available only to students enrolled in specific categorical programs. Estimate how many of your identified parenting students fall outside each program's eligibility criteria to understand the gaps.
5. Map the community organizations in your service area that are already serving parenting students, such as food pantries, childcare providers, housing agencies, and workforce development programs, and identify where warm referral relationships exist and where they need to be built.

Expand and Scale Supports

FACULTY LEADERSHIP AND FACULTY

For students, coursework is the most consistent, and sometimes only, experience they have of the college. Faculty therefore play a critical role in shaping whether students are able to build early momentum and continue progressing. Faculty professional learning is an important space to support parenting student work. It requires protecting time in the academic calendar, investing in coordination, sharing data at institutional gatherings, and sending clear signals from senior leadership that this population matters.

1. Faculty leadership can support the investment of at least one collaborative professional learning session each year for faculty, both full-time and adjunct, and student support staff focused on flexible pedagogy and supportive practices for parenting students. The session should be grounded in direct encounters with student experience through narrative, video, or facilitated listening rather than abstract demographic data alone. Frame it not as accommodation but as sound instructional design that benefits a broad range of students managing complex lives.



2. Design course policies and practices that reflect the realities of students balancing coursework, caregiving, and work responsibilities, recognizing that inflexible course requirements can unintentionally make continued participation harder. Examples may include clearly defined grace periods, absence flexibility, alternative participation options, transparent make-up procedures, advance notice of major deadlines, and recorded instructional content where appropriate.
3. Advocate within departments for course schedules, registration practices, and instructional norms that better reflect the realities of parenting students. Connect faculty working groups focused on parenting students to the president's cabinet or an equivalent governance body. This structural link helps sustain momentum that individual champions cannot carry alone.
4. Communicate class expectations clearly and early, including how students can navigate challenges and what options are available to connect with faculty when circumstances change. Include your institution's parenting student resource statement in syllabi and highlight information during the first week of courses as a direct signal to parenting students.
5. Proactively connect and refer students to established campus resources and supports early in the term, and on an ongoing basis, using established referral pathways, recognizing that timely connections can help students remain engaged and enrolled.

STUDENT SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS (ADVISING, STUDENT SERVICES, BASIC NEEDS)

Student support professionals are often the primary point of connection for parenting students and play a critical role in reducing the complexity students experience when navigating the institution. Advisors, basic needs coordinators, success coaches, and parenting student liaisons design and maintain the outreach channels, resource groups, event programming, and direct support relationships that create a sense of belonging for online parenting students. Administrators set the conditions; student support professionals and faculty do the relationship work.



1. Proactively identify and engage parenting students early in their academic journey with ongoing engagement at transition points, using available data and student interactions to understand needs and priorities.
2. Design and proactively deliver services in ways that reflect students' time constraints and competing responsibilities, including flexible and virtual options. Consider delivering virtual equivalents for every significant in-person support, including advising, resource fairs, peer support, and basic needs connection so that a parenting student who cannot come to campus remains fully connected to institutional support.
3. Identify the online touchpoints where parenting students already appear, such as financial aid portals, registration systems, and the student account page, and use those touchpoints for proactive outreach rather than expecting students to navigate to a separate resource. Use incentives and drop-in formats to drive engagement in LMS-based programming. Drop-in formats consistently outperform scheduled appointments for parenting students managing variable schedules.
4. Coordinate across departments to reduce complexity, ensuring students can access academic, financial, and basic needs supports without navigating multiple disconnected systems. Some examples of coordination include shared referral protocols, warm handoffs, and closed-loop follow-up so students do not have to repeatedly explain their circumstances or independently navigate disconnected offices.
5. Create an advisory mechanism for parenting students to give direct input on programming and service design. Advisory boards with parenting student representation ground decisions in student reality rather than staff assumptions.

INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH AND INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

Institutional research and institutional effectiveness professionals help colleges turn student experiences into actionable insights by developing data systems and analyses that guide timely, student-centered decisions.

1. Develop data approaches to identify parenting students who reflect the dynamic nature of students' lives, using multiple data sources rather than a single point of identification. Institutional research and institutional effectiveness staff inform what questions appear on intake surveys, how survey data connects to the student information system, which dashboards are built, and whether parenting status is tracked as a dynamic variable rather than a static data point.



2. Audit current identification pathways to improve how parenting students are identified. Map every place parenting status might be collected, such as FAFSA, intake surveys, enrollment forms, food pantry records, and child development center enrollment, and link sources into the student information system (SIS). Once identification improves, colleges can analyze existing data retrospectively and track parenting student outcomes going forward.
3. Design or expand a self-identification survey embedded in a high-traffic student touchpoint, framed broadly enough to capture kinship caregivers and grandparents, and linked dynamically to the SIS.
4. Build disaggregated parenting student data into existing dashboards. Track retention, term-to-term persistence, course success, and graduation rates for identified parenting students, with parenting status as a visible filter alongside the other student characteristics your college already reports. Consider other items: enrollment intensity, modality, age, campus, program, and support participation.
5. Share this data and explore its meaning publicly and at institutional gatherings.
6. Work with student-facing staff to understand which parenting students in your current identification systems are systematically missing, particularly those who are not captured through FAFSA-linked programs.

Strengthen Engagement With External Partners

External partners play a critical role in shaping the conditions under which institutions design, implement, and sustain efforts to support parenting students. Funders influence how much flexibility institutions have to act, learn, and adapt over time. Community partners extend the institution's capacity to meet students' academic needs, basic needs, and family support needs. In both cases, strong partnerships are reciprocal: Colleges and partners contribute value and should experience value through aligned, coordinated efforts.

These partners might include childcare providers, food banks, transportation providers, mental health providers, family housing providers, nonprofits that provide diapers and baby supplies, organizations that support campus food pantries, YMCAs, K-12 schools, Head Start programs, and work-based learning sites. Strategic partnerships are most effective when colleges and partners align services, share data and insights, and work together over time to improve outcomes for parenting students.



Funders and community partners can help colleges build institution-level infrastructure, including data systems, liaison roles, digital communities, and basic needs supports that reach the parenting students traditional programs do not serve.

FUNDERS

1. Support work that centers student experience and allows institutions to respond to evolving needs rather than requiring fully defined solutions upfront. Resource compensated student listening sessions, advisory roles, and feedback loops so institutions can design and adapt supports based on parenting students' lived experiences.
2. Invest in both implementation and the capacity to assess, learn, and improve, recognizing that sustainable impact requires ongoing adaptation and time for effective practices to become more embedded.
3. Prioritize funding for institution-level infrastructure over program-specific enhancements. A parenting student liaison, a dynamic data system, and an accessible digital peer community can reach all parenting students, while a program enhancement may reach only those already enrolled.
4. Support data system development specifically. The identification gap documented across the colleges is not only a resource gap but also an infrastructure gap. Investments in survey tools, SIS integration, and data dashboards can have multiplying returns across the full population and help make the case for state investment or policy adoption at scale.
5. Encourage alignment between funded initiatives and institutional priorities to support short- and long-term sustainability. Public and private funders can help institutions connect effective campus-based strategies to peer learning networks, technical assistance, state policy conversations, and sustainable funding opportunities so promising approaches can be sustained and scaled.



COMMUNITY PARTNERS

1. Align services with the realities of parenting students' schedules, caregiving responsibilities, and access to transportation, ensuring supports are accessible when students need them. Engage parenting students directly in assessing whether referral processes, service hours, locations, and eligibility requirements are accessible in practice.



2. Coordinate with colleges to ensure students experience connected, rather than fragmented, support across academic, basic needs, and community-based services.
3. Establish clear, two-way communication channels and referral processes so that students can be connected to resources quickly and without unnecessary barriers.
4. Share data and insights, where appropriate, to help colleges and partners better understand student needs, service utilization, and outcomes.
5. Engage in ongoing collaboration to interpret data, understand student needs, and refine how services are delivered over time, ensuring that both institutions and partners benefit from the partnership.

These recommendations underscore that improving outcomes for parenting students is a shared responsibility that requires alignment across roles, systems, and partners. Student-centered coordination among institutions and partners strengthens early momentum and creates conditions for continued progress by aligning supports with parenting students' experiences, using data to inform both design and ongoing improvement. These actions position colleges to move from isolated efforts to sustained, institution-wide approaches to student success.



V. Institution Spotlights

Each college's work was supported by ATD's multi-year parenting student initiative, which brought together community colleges committed to strengthening outcomes for parenting students and their families. ATD provided coaching, the Student Parent Opportunity Assessment, and facilitated peer learning through a Community of Practice, supporting colleges in building lasting institutional capacity. When parenting students persist and complete, the impact extends beyond the individual, strengthening families, communities, and the next generation.



Austin Community College

DESIGNING A SYSTEM THAT CAN REACH 5,500 PARENTING STUDENTS

Austin Community College (ACC) serves approximately 75,000 students across eleven campuses in a service area the size of a small state. Of roughly 43,000 degree-seeking students, an estimated 5,500 are parenting students. That number shapes every decision the college makes about supporting this population: No single program, no single event, and no single staff member can reach students at that scale. The institutional structures have to do most of the work.

Texas House Bill 1361, passed in 2023, requires public higher education institutions to collect and report parenting student data annually to the state. ACC turned that compliance mandate into a foundation for proactive support. When students register for classes, a flag prompts them to complete a brief survey. Among those who identify as parents and indicate they want more information, data flows automatically to the basic needs team each day, triggering outreach about childcare scholarships, community subsidy programs, and parenting student liaison services. A state requirement designed for accountability became the entry point for a relationship.

Before ACC's chancellor launched the college's strategic plan, *Theory of Change*, parenting students were served by generalist advocates managing multiple populations at once.

Theory of Change changed the architecture. "[Meet Basic Needs](#)" became one of four institutional cornerstones, giving parenting student support structural legitimacy, dedicated staffing, and access to resources that standalone programs rarely sustain. Cara Crowley, special advisor to the chancellor for basic needs systems, was brought in to build out the system. The parenting student work moved from scattered advocate responsibilities into a named focus area with its own manager, coordinators, and childcare specialists.

ACC's student data lives in Salesforce, where the advocacy team can see a full picture of each student: family events attended, food pantry visits, childcare



scholarship status, emergency fund requests, and liaison contacts. Matt Figg, senior director of institutional analytics, and the Office of Institutional Research and Analytics added a geographic layer, producing heat maps of where parenting students live across the district so that event placement reflects where students actually are rather than campus locations.

When the team needed a student-centered way to make parenting students visible to faculty, they did not produce a brochure. They partnered with ACCTV and Austin PBS to produce a short documentary, “[Day in the Life – Parenting Students](#),” following three parenting students through their days, balancing coursework, work, and caregiving. The chancellor personally facilitated a panel with the featured students at a campus event, a further example of valuing these students’ voices and experiences. The episode became a professional development tool. At a January faculty development day, faculty signed up for a session that used the video as its centerpiece and left with a one-pager on parenting student resources formatted for their course management platforms. Many faculty said they had not realized how many parenting students were sitting in their classrooms.

When the team needed to understand what made events worth parenting students’ time, they partnered with a graduate student from The University of Texas at Austin LBJ School of Public Affairs to lead structured focus groups. Students said clearly that events needed to serve more than one purpose. That research shaped how every family event is now designed: scheduled around school closure days, held where students live based on heat map data, and stocked with practical take-home items. The college also coordinates directly with community food resources and childcare subsidy programs so that students leaving an event carry away more than information. ACC’s experience suggests that partnerships can extend a college’s capacity in ways that make it possible to reach more students than institutional resources alone would allow.

“This is how you grow your team. This is how you grow your institutional support. If we are going to grow, we have to show that when we provide these services intentionally and systematically, students complete.”

— Angelica Cancino de Sandoval, Senior Director, Basic Needs & Advocacy

WHAT THE DATA SHOW

Parenting student persistence at ACC increased from 58.1% in fall 2022 to 61.9% in fall 2024, a 3.8 percentage point increase against an ATD grant goal of 2%. Fall 2024 also saw a 1.5 percentage point decrease in parenting students fully withdrawing from all courses. Among students who received basic needs services, retention runs at approximately 74%, compared to roughly 64% college-wide, suggesting students connected to the basic needs system are retained at a rate nearly ten percentage points higher than their peers.



The new identification methodology reported more male parents, a 10% increase from the previous approach, with notable increases among white, Asian, and Hispanic students.

WHAT PRACTITIONERS SHOULD CONSIDER

What changed at ACC was how the college identifies, listens to, and develops supports to increase parenting students' success. When students described how they balance nonnegotiable family responsibilities, work, and coursework, the college did not respond with a single program but instead by making meeting students' basic needs one of four institutional pillars.

Students connected to basic needs services were retained at a higher rate than the college-wide average, consistent with ACC's own thesis in making "Meet Basic Needs" one of four institutional cornerstones: Parenting students often face comparable pressures whether they are formally connected to a service. This reflects the cross-college practice of expanding access to holistic student supports, including basic needs supports, so more parenting students who could benefit are connected to them.

What practitioners should notice is that students shaped what ACC built. Parenting students participated in the *Theory of Change* design teams. Their stories, documented in a PBS collaborative documentary, changed what faculty ask on the first day of class. Their feedback about time, that an evening away from their children has to be worth it, changed how ACC designs events and where it holds them. The heat map showing where students live became the map for where the college offers services.

The data infrastructure, the childcare scholarship redesign, the community partnerships with Austin PBS, and local workforce resources are supports ACC built in response to what parenting students said they needed.

"Presenting at Spring Development Day was an amazing opportunity to connect with faculty to support our parenting students. Faculty were able to hear from our parenting students about their experiences and think through integrating support into their classrooms. Faculty discussed putting parenting student resources on their syllabus and 100% of faculty surveyed felt that the information would make them more effective in their role."

— Amber Huffman, Parenting and Family Engagement Manager



Bakersfield College

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARENTING STUDENT SUCCESS

Bakersfield College is the largest Hispanic-Serving Institution in California, serving approximately 46,000 students in Kern County. A few years into a focused effort to support parenting students, the college saw an opportunity to extend the strengths of its most effective programs to more students.

California's CalWORKs and Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education (CARE) programs are effective. At Bakersfield, students enrolled in these state categorical programs consistently outperform their peers in persistence, transfer-level course completion, and degree attainment. The programs provide intensive case management, mandated advising contacts, and wraparound support. But because these programs are intentionally designed around specific eligibility criteria, some parenting students are ineligible. CalWORKs is linked to the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program and requires TANF eligibility, while CARE focuses on single parents who also qualify for the Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) program.

When César Jiménez, Ed.D., vice president of student services, asked the director of EOPS, CARE, and CalWORKs whether students were being denied due to capacity, her answer was clear: Eligibility was the barrier, not space. When Sooyeon Kim, Ph.D., dean of the Office of Institutional Effectiveness (OIE), disaggregated outcomes by support status, the gap became undeniable: The data showed how much structured support mattered and pointed to an opportunity to make similar supports available to more parenting students.

Bakersfield's response began with an important recognition: CalWORKs and CARE were achieving strong outcomes for the students they were designed to serve. The next step was to build alongside those programs, creating institution-level supports that any identified parenting student could access, regardless of income, family structure, or documentation status.

The centerpiece of that effort is an inaugural parenting student liaison position, held by a parenting student leader who brings lived experience, credibility, and peer connection to help students navigate resources across the college, regardless of whether they qualify for CalWORKs, CARE, or any other state program.

The food pantry was expanded to include donated items such as diapers, baby formula, and wipes, which were made available to any student without an application or eligibility screening. The idea came directly from a peer exchange within the ATD parenting student cohort. "Boom, that's easy, right? That's an easy win," Dr. Jiménez recalled.

"When you look at parenting students with structured support versus without structured support, the gap in their achievement is huge."

**— Dr. Sooyeon Kim,
Dean of Institutional
Effectiveness**



Priority registration, California state policy for parenting students, is now actively promoted to all identified parenting students, not just those already enrolled in state programs.

WHAT THE DATA SHOW

This more comprehensive approach found that approximately 27% of Bakersfield students are parents, compared with only 12% identified through FAFSA data. This impact is clearly demonstrated in persistence rates among first-time fall 2024 students. While 73% of non-parents persisted to the spring 2025 semester, student-parents participating in CARE and CalWORKs achieved an 87% spring persistence rate. Sixty-one percent of student-parents without these structured supports returned. Within the fall 2024 cohort, 61% of CARE and CalWORKs participants successfully re-enrolled for fall 2025. In comparison, the year-to-year persistence rate was 59% for non-parents, and just 42% for student-parents who did not have access to these targeted supports.

Bakersfield College's OIE has added parenting student status to its public Tableau dashboards, which enable disaggregation by major, attendance status (full-time or part-time), and whether the student is enrolled in a high-touch program such as CARE or CalWORKs. That step turned an internal finding into an institution-wide accountability signal.

WHAT PRACTITIONERS SHOULD CONSIDER

Bakersfield's experience reveals a pattern that any institution with state categorical parenting student programs should examine: Programs that produce strong outcomes for eligible students can also help institutions identify opportunities to extend similar support models to parenting students who are not currently eligible. Making that gap visible requires disaggregating outcomes by support status, not just by parenting student status. Once the gap appears in the data and the data is public, the institution is accountable for it in ways it was not before. What the college learned about getting started is equally transferable. Institutional supports do not have to be expensive or complex to move quickly. A parenting student website, a Canvas shell, pantry items without an eligibility screen, and priority registration promoted to everyone are investments any institution can make in a single semester.

Finally, state program directors belong within the broader institutional conversation, not alongside it. While CalWORKs and CARE are California-specific, every state has some version of this dynamic: categorical programs with strong outcomes for eligible students. Bakersfield's experience points to what becomes possible when an institution decides that strong outcomes for some parenting students can serve as the foundation for a broader institutional commitment to parenting student success.



North Arkansas College of the University of Arkansas

WHEN BELONGING IS BUILT BEFORE A STUDENT ASKS FOR HELP

North Arkansas College of the University of Arkansas (UA Northark) sits in Harrison, in the Ozark highlands of Arkansas, where the college is, for many students, the most direct path to a livable wage. The college has run the Career Pathways Initiative (CPI), a state-funded workforce program for parenting students with financial need, for 19 years. The program has deep roots, strong outcomes, and a committed team.

At UA Northark, the goal is to foster a strong sense of belonging by proactively creating a supportive and welcoming environment for students from the very beginning of their journey. Leaders recognized an important reality: Even a successful program cannot reach every parenting student.

The data confirmed it. During academic year 2021–22, institutional research identified 586 parenting students using FAFSA ISIR data. When that data was disaggregated, 131 parenting students were served by CPI and 40 by TRIO, leaving 415 parenting students whom neither program reached: students above income thresholds, those who had not completed the FAFSA, and those who had applied but did not qualify. Recognizing that even a successful program could still leave some students without support became the foundation for a broader solution at the college.



The online new student orientation now includes a module for all parenting students, not only those in Career Pathways. A “Go-To Person” resource sheet, updated each semester, appears in every course syllabus, on the college website, and on classroom posters. It tells students exactly whom to contact for mental health, housing, food, and benefits navigation. Pete’s Pantry, the campus food pantry, serves every student without requiring an application or an eligibility screening. The Boone County Resource Council makes warm referrals to housing agencies, mental health providers, and social service organizations, providing students with not just directions to an office but a named contact who knows the student is coming.

As faculty worked to support parenting students in real-time classroom settings, they encountered a practical question that existing policy did not clearly address: Could students bring children to class? The policy had been written for compliance and did not address the everyday situations faculty were being asked to handle. UA Northark used its GADIE process (Gather,



Analyze, Develop, Implement, Evaluate) to develop a policy that reflected the institution's values. The process included both parenting and non-parenting students, went through the cabinet and a 10-day campus comment period, and earned board of trustees approval.

Family-centered events reinforce a welcoming message across campus. Fall Fest, Halloween trick-or-treating through campus hallways, and the end-of-year banquet create visible opportunities for children to be welcomed into the college community and to celebrate their parents' accomplishments. Events are scheduled in the evenings, and marketing materials include messaging that kids are welcome on campus.

Commencement ceremonies serve as the most visible and meaningful celebration of student achievement. Parenting student graduates receive special cords and T-shirts featuring the phrase "I Changed My Family's Future." The president invites parenting students to stand during the ceremony.



WHAT THE DATA SHOW

Parenting students at UA Northark accounted for 11% of enrollment in fall 2024; by fall 2025, that share had grown to 13.8%, signaling that more students are being identified, reached, and retained. Parenting students persisted at higher rates (86.8%), with non-parenting students persisting at 78.1% in 2024–25. The college is careful not to attribute this to any single intervention. The numbers reflect a sustained institutional commitment to making parenting students visible.

WHAT PRACTITIONERS SHOULD CONSIDER

Belonging is cultivated through numerous small yet intentional actions and signals that communicate to parenting students that they are valued, supported, and deserving of care from the moment they arrive.

The common thread in UA Northark's approach is that belonging is built proactively, before a student needs a support service. Likewise, the investment isn't concentrated in a single office; it's throughout the college. The children-on-campus policy process offers a replicable model for any institution grappling with the same question. The GADIE framework, which gathered input from parenting and non-parenting students alike before moving through formal governance, produced a policy with broad institutional ownership.



Patrick & Henry Community College

WHEN DATA SUPPORTS A NEW APPROACH

Patrick & Henry Community College (Patrick & Henry) serves approximately 2,000 students in Martinsville, in the southwestern corner of Virginia. When the college turned deliberate attention toward parenting students after the pandemic, it found a population it had been broadly acknowledging without systematically understanding.

The obvious answer to parenting students' needs seemed clear: Build a childcare center. What was missing was the data to test whether that premise matched how Patrick & Henry's parenting students actually lived. Donata Worrell, director of planning and evaluation, developed a Qualtrics survey sent to all enrolled students over 18, asking them to self-identify as parents. "A student that wasn't a parent at the beginning of the semester may be a parent by the end," Worrell said.

The data that came back challenged the childcare center assumption. Fifty-five percent of parenting students at Patrick & Henry came to campus zero days per week. Another 22% came one to three days. Over three-quarters of the college's parenting students were primarily or entirely online. A campus childcare center serves the students who come to campus.

The fuller picture the data painted was of students managing extraordinary complexity. Although most parenting students attended online, this did not eliminate their childcare needs. Fifty-eight percent were enrolled in three to five classes, effectively full-time students. Most were working 25 or more hours per week. Eighty-four percent were 25 or older. The majority had one or two children, more than half younger than school age. Online education was not a convenience for this population; it was the architecture that made college possible at all. "That's telling me that online education is the key to their progress," Chris Wikstrom, Ph.D., vice president of instruction and student services, reflected. "And if we're going to be intentional about our priorities, this is where our focus needs to be."

Data without action does not change outcomes. The Qualtrics infrastructure Worrell built was necessary, but it could not support students, write grant applications, or create a webpage. That required a person whose job included those responsibilities to accomplish the college's goals.

Kaylyn Gary, the college's accessibility specialist, became that person. Parenting student support was added to her portfolio as a named, daily

"Let's challenge this narrative and make sure we are aligning things that may not have as much cost but could see bigger gains."

**— Dr. Chris Wikstrom,
Vice President of
Instruction and Student
Services**



responsibility, not a committee assignment. Within months of Gary taking ownership, the college secured two grants in a single week — a mini-grant for child-friendly supplies in advising centers and a state VCCS childcare grant. The data infrastructure Worrell had already built made rapid applications possible. The college had survey results, a qualified parenting student count, and a trackable SIS cohort ready when the opportunities appeared. “We aren’t a patient institution,” Wikstrom noted. “We like to recognize and move toward action.”

WHAT THE DATA SHOW

The first-time-in-college (FTIC) student retention picture showed meaningful early movement. Fall-to-fall retention for FTIC parenting students increased from 40% (fall 2023 to fall 2024) to 67% (fall 2024 to fall 2025). The college is cautious about attributing causality, as the sample is small, the tracking is new, and much of the support infrastructure is still being built. What the data confirms is that the college now knows enough to ask the right questions and to act before students disappear rather than after.

WHAT PRACTITIONERS SHOULD CONSIDER

Patrick & Henry’s experience makes clear this work is not solely about data. It is about what happens when you stop assuming you know who your parenting students are and what they need. The governance model Patrick & Henry built — technical, human, and conceptual roles held by specific people with named responsibilities — is more transferable than it might appear. With this organizational approach, the college was ready when two grant opportunities arrived within the same week. It had the structure in place to plan, monitor, and act effectively and efficiently. The coordinator knew the data, knew the students, and was positioned to act when opportunities appeared.



Pierce College

BUILDING A CULTURE WHERE PARENTING STUDENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN BELONG

Pierce College (Pierce) serves approximately 8,966 students across two main campuses and Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington State. The college estimates that roughly 20% of its students are parents, yet as of summer 2025, 63% of students had not identified their parenting status. Centering parenting students and how the college serves them has guided nearly a decade of work.

That work did not begin with a formal strategic plan. It began with a faculty counselor who was looking for a meaningful project, and a set of data presented at an all-college meeting showing that single parents at Pierce were not succeeding at the same rate as their peers. Monica Nucciarone, faculty counselor advisor, proposed something simple: a bimonthly meeting space and a series of events where single parents could connect with each other and with faculty and staff. During spring break, timed so parents could attend without missing class, a three-hour focus group convened 12 single parents. One described raising two young children with disabilities. Finding childcare, she explained, required someone specifically trained to meet her children's needs, and when that one caregiver was sick, her path to class closed. A faculty member left the room and offered six words: "Everyone needs to hear their stories." That response became a design principle. A survey developed with the institutional research department reached 112 single parents and surfaced three clear priorities: child-friendly study spaces, faculty flexibility on attendance and deadlines, and welcoming campus environments for families. Those three priorities continue to anchor the work today. Ongoing surveys using elements of the [Family-Friendly Campus Toolkit](#) focus on the ever-evolving needs and experiences of parenting students, rather than treating the original inquiry as settled.

Pierce College threads professional development through every channel available: All District Professional Days, individual department meetings, communities of practice, and a Faculty Mentor/Advisor Canvas site that includes trauma-informed content specific to the experiences of single parents. A parallel Inclusive Practices Canvas site extends that learning college-wide so the message is not siloed to a single initiative.

Faculty partnered in the development and refinement of more flexible practices. Initial conversations surfaced questions about attendance requirements and the concern that flexibility could invite misuse. The faculty team leading professional development worked through these questions with their colleagues, offering counterpoints, naming alternatives, and describing

"Bringing children onto campus, having them see their parents attend school and graduate, sets the tone for them. They're learning that this is what they can do, too."

**— Ann Slaughter,
Director of Child
Development Centers
and Family Advocacy**



what other faculty had tried and what results they saw. At the syllabus level, many faculty have built predictable flexibility into their course structures. Some include free passes for absences and 24-to-48-hour grace periods after assignment deadlines. Faculty who shifted their practices report stronger classroom engagement and students working harder, not less.

For decades, the college's children-on-campus policy was little more than a ban on children in any campus spaces. A collaborative revision in 2020 created more welcoming language but still focused on limitations and prohibitions. The formal pivot came when the role of director of child development centers was restructured by administration to include family advocacy, transforming individual commitment into an institutional job description.

WHAT THE DATA SHOW

Single-parent fall-to-fall retention at Pierce moved from 20% in 2022–23 to 48% in 2024–25. The team is careful not to attribute this to any single initiative but instead sees it as an indication of a broader cultural shift. There is also evidence that does not fit neatly into a spreadsheet: Children who attended Child Development Centers while their parents attended Pierce College are returning as students. The current president of the Puyallup student body was a five-year-old in that preschool.

WHAT PRACTITIONERS SHOULD CONSIDER

Before Pierce could change its policies, redesign its spaces, or restructure its roles, it had to build a shared understanding of who its parenting students were and what it would take to support their success. What practitioners should notice is that each structural change Pierce made was preceded by an enabling condition that made the case for it.

Overall, single-parent fall-to-fall retention data matters. So does the five-year-old who sat in that preschool while her parent attended Pierce and is now the president of the student body. Pierce College worked on both structure and culture to support parenting students in belonging, advancing, and thriving.



Roane State Community College

REACHING STUDENTS BEYOND FAFSA THROUGH THE POWER OF COMMUNITY

Roane State Community College (Roane State) serves approximately 6,800 students across ten campuses in two time zones in Tennessee. For years, FAFSA data identified approximately 200 parenting students per semester. Success coaches and food pantry staff knew that number wasn't reflective of the true population. The question was how to identify their parenting student population and connect with them across all of their campuses.

The challenge with FAFSA data is structural. The new FAFSA asks about dependents rather than children, an ambiguous field that misses caregivers such as grandparents, older siblings, and students with caregiving responsibilities that do not fit the standard definition of parenting.

The team designed a survey embedded directly in RaiderNet, the account portal students visit every time they check a bill, register for classes, or retrieve a PIN. The question was deliberately broad: "Are you caring for minor children in your home?" That framing captures grandparents, kinship caregivers, and anyone else with daily responsibility for a minor child, not only biological parents. IT built a direct integration with Banner, linking every survey response to a student ID and feeding data into Power BI dashboards where parenting status can be disaggregated across retention, persistence, course success, program of study, and campus location. The survey is dynamic: Students can update their status mid-semester, which is modeled on a COVID-era wellness check-in that had proven students would engage with timely, low-barrier prompts.

The result was a count of approximately 600 parenting students per semester, three times what FAFSA had been showing. "The difference between identifying 200 students and identifying 600 students," said Karen Brunner, vice president for institutional effectiveness, "I would call that a huge accomplishment." Roane State's team asked parenting students directly how



they wanted to be reached. The answer was immediate: the LMS. “That’s where we live anyway as students.” The college built a Parenting Student Resource Group in Momentum, its D2L LMS, and opened it at the start of a semester. In the first week, without any staff facilitation, a group of parenting student fathers organized a coffee meetup.

The group is asynchronous by design, because parenting students post at 11 p.m. and 2 a.m., in the moments between a child’s bedtime and a homework deadline. Lisa Steffensen, dean of students, adds each new student manually after a RaiderNet survey click and sends a personal welcome message. Students share recipes, study strategies, and resources. Brian Smith, 42, a first-generation student pursuing pre-law while running a mobile mechanic business and raising three teenagers, connected with another parenting student father through the group and they brought transfer concerns to administration together. Smith was named Freshman of the Year. “I’m still here,” he said. “These programs are working because I’m still here.”



Connection in the LMS is one strand of a support web the college has built deliberately. Casey Clark holds a full-time student support advocate role that began part-time during COVID and grew into a permanent position. The college recognized the need for dedicated, responsive support for students navigating complex circumstances. Clark manages 40 to 60 cases per semester, nearly a third of which involve parenting students. Food pantries at four campuses allow students to shop for a week’s groceries rather than taking a bag of canned goods. Kindness Closets stock what SNAP does not cover: diapers, wipes, laundry detergent, hygiene items, and school supplies. Students at campuses without a food pantry submit requests by QR code form; Clark boxes items and ships them. Students are also engaging strongly with text-based outreach, another sign that direct, accessible, and timely communication matters.

Jeannette Rigsby, 38, a first-generation student and former high school dropout now homeschooling her daughter while attending college, wrote her speech class assignment as a proposal for family-friendly study spaces in campus libraries. The proposal became

“We don’t all have a village, and Roane State has become that village.”

**— Jeannette Rigsby,
parenting student**



a grant application. “My school prioritizes my children,” she said. “I want to impress my school back, because they care about my child.” When a parenting student’s classroom assignment helps shape institutional infrastructure, it shows what becomes possible when students’ ideas are heard.

WHAT THE DATA SHOW

Roane State has a clearer picture of its parenting students and their student success outcomes. Seventy-three percent of parenting students enrolled in fall 2024 were retained the following fall. By comparison, when the college relied only on FAFSA data to identify parenting students, the retention rate from fall 2023 to fall 2024 was 58%. The increase reflects, in part, a more complete picture of who the college’s parenting students are, drawn from multiple data sources rather than FAFSA alone.

WHAT PRACTITIONERS SHOULD CONSIDER

Roane State’s data story is not primarily about technology. The Banner integration and Power BI dashboards matter, but the insight that made them necessary was human:

Success coaches were hearing stories that didn’t fit the official count, and someone paid attention to that gap. The survey’s effectiveness comes from its placement inside a portal students visit for transactional reasons, not because they sought out a parenting student resource, and from its framing. “Are you caring for minor children in your home?” is a different question than, “Are you a parenting student?” That broader framing found grandparents, kinship caregivers, and siblings who manage a child’s care.

When students build community inside a structure an institution created, the Parenting Student Resource Group, they tell the institution it got something right. Roane State got the location right because it asked rather than assumed.



VI. Conclusion

Sustained progress is made possible when colleges act on available insights and refine their approaches over time. Across cohorts, institutions are demonstrating that meaningful change begins with action and is strengthened through continuous, data-informed improvement. By linking supports to outcomes and adapting strategies based on what they learn, colleges are building the institutional capacity needed to sustain progress and respond to evolving student needs.

These efforts strengthen the core domains of community vibrancy by expanding access, supporting early momentum, and positioning students for continued progress toward completion and economic mobility. The lessons from this work extend beyond parenting students, pointing to a broader opportunity to strengthen institutional approaches to student success through alignment, coordination, and continuous improvement. As colleges consider how to advance their work, they can use this guide, including the [Cross-College Practices Implementation Self-Assessment](#), to review their institutional practices.

This work is intentionally ongoing. Parenting student populations, their needs, and their institutional contexts will continue to evolve, requiring colleges to remain responsive and adaptive. The practices highlighted in this guide are not intended as a final destination but rather as a foundation for continued learning, reflection, and institutional growth in support of parenting student success.



Scaling Success for Parenting Students Cross-College Practices Implementation Self-Assessment

The seven practices below are grounded in research, validated through implementation across the community colleges in Achieving the Dream's parenting student cohorts, and translatable for practice. Each is described in full in *Scaling Success for Parenting Students: A Guide*. Meaningful change begins with action. This self-assessment invites colleges to reflect on where each cross-college practice currently stands in order to identify priorities and align next steps. Some practices may not yet be occurring, others may be emerging but not systematic, and others may be in progress or reaching scale. Consider broadening who participates in this reflection beyond those who have traditionally led this work.

Cross-College Practice	Not Yet Occurring No documented activity or designated responsibility	Emerging, Not Yet Systematic Initial or isolated activity led by individuals or one department	In Progress Coordinated implementation is underway across multiple areas, with assigned responsibility and some evidence of use	Reaching Scale The practice is embedded across the institution, sustainably resourced, routinely assessed, and experienced consistently by students
1. Use dynamic data to identify, understand, and act	☐	☐	☐	☐
2. Increase institutional awareness through professional learning	☐	☐	☐	☐
3. Adopt supportive institutional policies and practices	☐	☐	☐	☐
4. Foster connection and sense of belonging	☐	☐	☐	☐
5. Expand or scale holistic supports	☐	☐	☐	☐
6. Align and embed parenting student success efforts within institutional priorities	☐	☐	☐	☐
7. Build and strengthen strategic partnerships	☐	☐	☐	☐



Cross-College Implementation Self-Assessment Reflection Prompts:

- What was the catalyst for change at your institution? What role did students play?
- Which practices, if strengthened, would create the greatest movement toward access, momentum, and completion?
- Out of these seven Cross-College Practices, which are your priorities?

Who participated in the reflection and other notes:



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