

IMPROVING MENTAL HEALTH OF STUDENT PARENTS:

A Framework For Higher Education



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SUMMARY

The Jed Foundation (JED) is a nonprofit that protects emotional health and prevents suicide for our nation's teens and young adults. In 2020, JED entered into a partnership with Ascend at the Aspen Institute to better understand the mental health needs of parenting students at undergraduate institutions across the country.¹ Parenting students represent over 20% of the total undergraduate student population. The final output of the partnership is a framework and set of recommendations for administrators, faculty, and staff at institutions of higher learning to understand how they can better support the mental and emotional well-being of parenting students. All of the recommendations in this framework link back to mental health, but our approach to mental health is broad and includes many aspects that affect mental health but may not be thought of as traditionally part of mental health. These aspects include factors such as feelings of belonging and connectedness and the ability (or inability) to satisfy basic needs.

In order to ensure that our framework is grounded in the best evidence available, we have undertaken a literature review; an analysis of existing national data on the emotional well-being of undergraduate students, including the [Healthy Minds Network Study](#), the American College Health Association's [National College Health Assessment](#) national survey, and the Hope Center's 2020 [#RealCollege Survey](#); and an original mixed-methods research study looking at the unmet needs of student parents. The Healthy Minds Network (HMS) study data from 2020 includes a sample of 46,336 undergraduate students enrolled in JED Campus schools across the country and the 2020 American College Health Association (ACHA) data includes a sample of 88,051 undergraduate students enrolled in schools across the country. The sample included 7,290 parenting students from the HMS dataset and 5,102 parenting students from the ACHA dataset. In addition, we analyzed 2020 data from the Hope Center's 2020 [#RealCollege Survey](#), including 195,000 undergraduates and 32,000 student parents. Our qualitative research was conducted in late fall 2020 with 25 student parents, and our quantitative research, conducted in winter 2021, included 1,022 college students at institutions across the U.S. (436 nonparenting students and 586 parenting students).

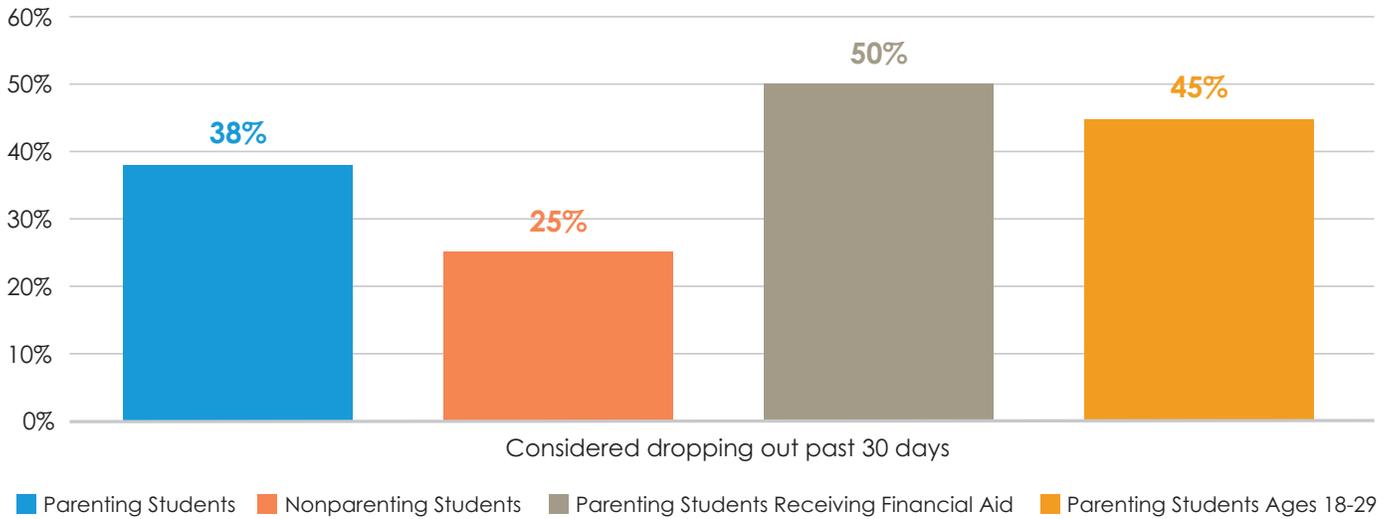
¹ Note that this report focuses exclusively on undergraduate parenting students (also described as students who are parents), not graduate or professional students.

Data Source	Description	Year	Number of Students (Total)	Number of Parenting Students (%)
Healthy Minds Study (HMS)	An annual web-based study examining mental health, service utilization, and student attitudes about mental health.	2020	46,336	7,290 (15.7%)
National College Health Assessment (NCHA)	An annual, national survey collecting data on a wide range of health issues among undergraduate students, including mental health and substance use.	2020	88,051	5,102 (5.8%)
2020 #RealCollege Survey	The nation's largest survey assessing basic needs of college students. The survey also allows for insights into diversity and equity, student health, and emergency aid.	2020	195,000	32,000 (16.4%)
Original Qualitative Research (in partnership with Fluent Research)	An asynchronous, online discussion among 25 current student parents to gain better understanding of their challenges and needs.	2020	N/A	25
Original Quantitative Research (in partnership with Fluent Research)	A nationally representative survey of undergraduate students, over-sampling for student parents, in order to better understand the challenges and needs of this population, especially in comparison to nonparenting students.	2021	1,022	586 parents (436 nonparents)

Figure 1: Summary of Data Sources

Overall, we found that parenting students are more likely to face a number of stressors that put them at greater risk for mental health issues than nonparenting students. In addition, parenting students consistently and overwhelmingly report feeling isolated and disconnected from campus. Given that a sense of belonging is key to positive mental health, this lack of inclusion is another area of risk. They deal with the constant juggling of childcare, employment, and coursework, lack of sleep, continual stress and anxiety, and feelings of guilt. In our original survey research with Fluent Research, 43% of student parents reported feeling stressed all or most of the time, 40% reported feeling overwhelmed, 29% reported difficulty regulating emotions, 28% reported feelings of depression, and 28% reported a sense of social isolation. More than a third (38%) said that they had considered dropping out of school within the previous 30 days, compared with 25% of nonparenting students. Among those student parents receiving financial aid (ages 18-45), this percentage that considered dropping out was 50% and among 18-29-year-olds it was 45%. In our qualitative research we discovered some examples of detrimental attitudes of faculty in particular and learned about the way in which these negative attitudes make parenting students feel unwelcome. Four in 10 student parents describe the experience of attending school while raising a child as extremely or very challenging.

PARENTING AND NONPARENTING STUDENTS CONSIDERING DROPPING OUT OF SCHOOL



We also discovered that parenting students of different ages have different attitudes and experiences. Our research suggests that institutions of higher learning would do well to focus efforts to engage and support student parents on younger parenting students ages 18-24, as these students face particular challenges around poor mental health, substance use, and feelings of low self-esteem and isolation. On the other hand, older parenting students (ages 25 and older) demonstrated a degree of resilience that was not always evident even in their nonparenting counterparts. These differences between older and younger parents held up across both two- and four-year institutions. These findings suggest that areas of opportunity for higher education institutions include initiatives that increase parenting students' sense of belonging on campus as well as programs that target younger parenting students. Focusing on changing the attitudes and behaviors of faculty members is also a high priority.

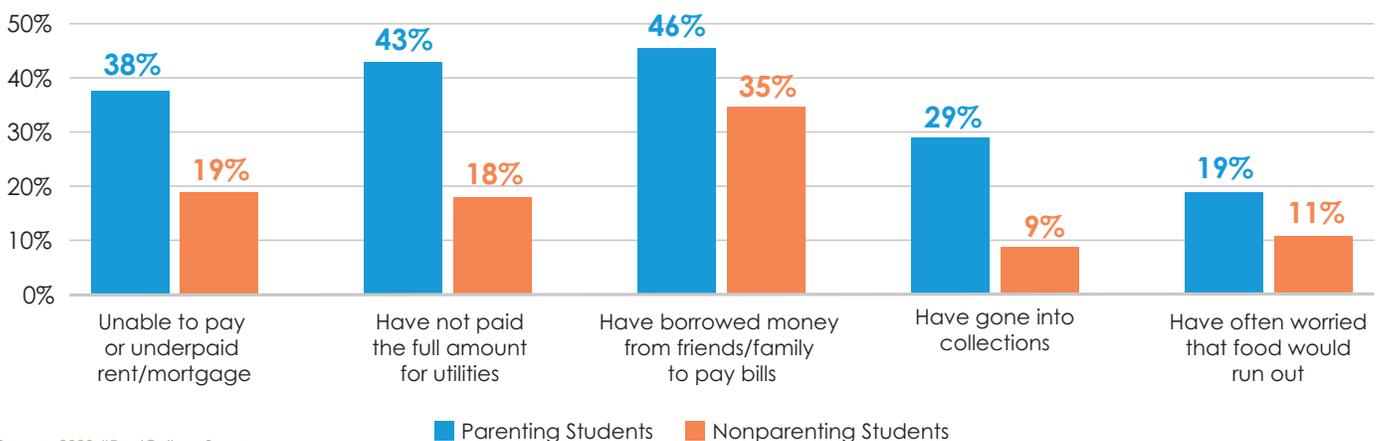


KEY BARRIERS AND PERCEPTIONS

The data clearly show that parenting students face a number of unique barriers. Key among them is financial stress. Nearly a quarter (21.3%) of parents in the HMS dataset describe their financial situation as “always stressful” versus only 14.5% of nonparents. Parenting students are also far more likely to work full time than nonparents.² Many parenting students are also responsible for more than one dependent at home.³

The 2020 #RealCollege Survey documents a wide range of basic needs insecurities that are significantly more common among parents than among nonparents. Parenting students are more likely to have been unable to pay or underpaid rent or mortgage in the past 12 months (38% versus 19%); more likely to have not paid the full amount for utilities in the past 12 months (43% versus 18%); more likely to have borrowed money from friends or family in the past month to pay bills (45.7% versus 35%); more likely to have gone into collections in the past 12 months (29% versus 9%); and more likely to have often worried in the past 30 days that food would run out (19% often true versus 11% often true). The relationship between basic needs insecurity and mental health is complex and bidirectional. Poverty exacerbates feelings of hopelessness and at the same time depression and other mental health issues can exacerbate barriers and challenges to making ends meet.

PAST YEAR BASIC NEEDS INSECURITIES: PARENTING STUDENTS VS. NONPARENTING STUDENTS



Source: 2020 #RealCollegeSurvey

According to the NCHA survey, parenting students report feeling less connected to campus. They are more likely than their nonparenting counterparts to strongly disagree that they feel like they belong on campus.⁴ This finding that student parents think schools have their best interest in mind might mean that parenting students may respond well to campaigns initiated by the university to help them feel more connected. These campaigns and efforts may take the form of including their families in more campus events and helping parenting students find other parenting student peers.

² 18.31% of parents in the HMS dataset worked 36-40 hours per week versus 6.69% of non-parents.

³ 38.15% in the HMS dataset report having one child, 30.27% report having two children, 16.6% report having three children, and 14.98% report having four or more.

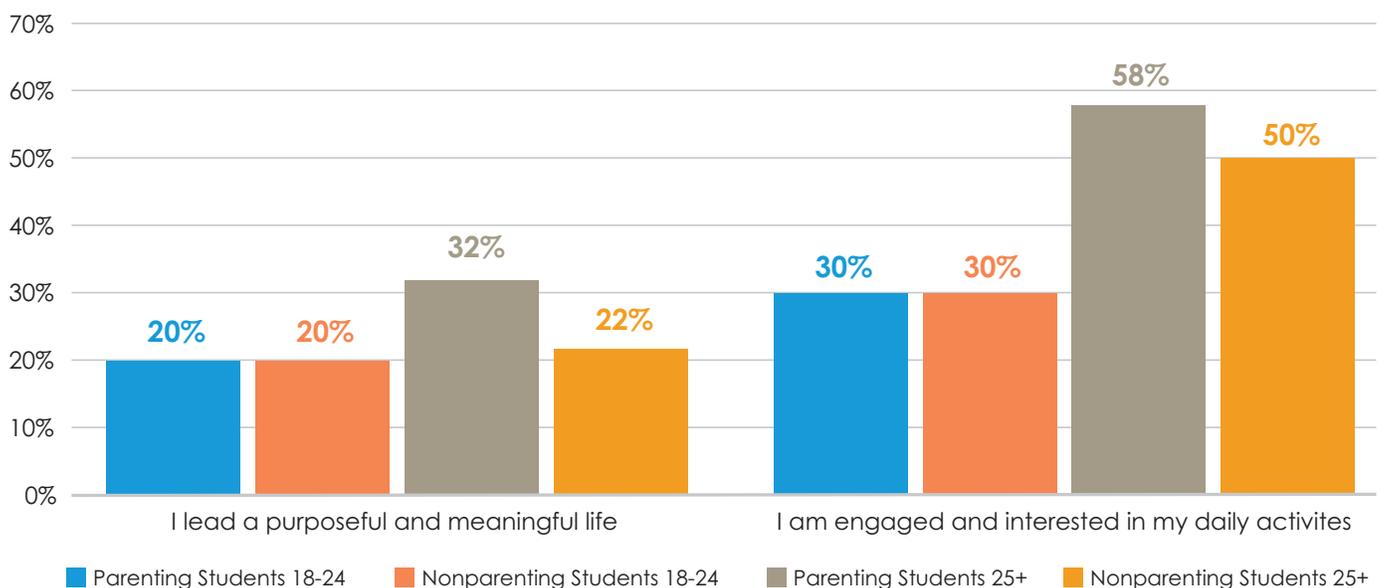
⁴ 20% of parenting students versus 15% of nonparenting students in the ACHA dataset report strongly agreeing that the university prioritizes health and well-being. 2.72% of parents strongly disagree that they feel like they belong on campus versus 1.94% of non-parents.



SENSE OF LIFE PURPOSE AND MEANING

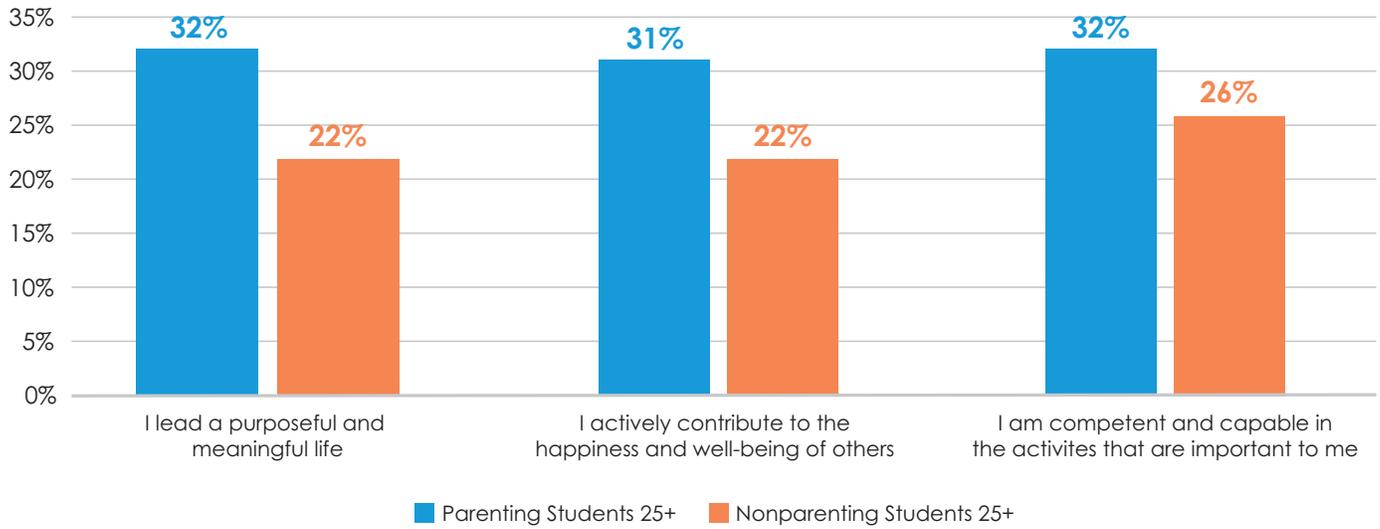
In a subsequent analysis of data by age (18-24 and 25 and older), younger parents aged 18-24 struggled with feelings about their life and future more than their nonparent counterparts. Older parents aged 25 and up had more positive feelings about their life and future than their nonparent counterparts. To take just one example, nonparents and parents in the 18-24 age group had similar rates of “agree” and “strongly agree” in response to the statements, “I lead a purposeful and meaningful life” (around 20% strongly agree in both groups) and “I am engaged and interested in my daily activities” (around 30% agree and 11% strongly agree in both groups). By contrast, parents in the 25 and older age bracket were more likely than nonparents in the 25 and older age bracket to agree or strongly agree with these statements.⁵ Parents in the 25 and older age group were also more likely than their nonparent counterparts to strongly agree with the statement, “I actively contribute to the happiness and well-being of others” (31% versus 22%) as well as with the statement, “I am competent and capable in the activities that are important to me” (32% versus 26%). While we did not follow up on these questions directly, our hypothesis is that parenting in general fosters a sense of purpose and competence that is more likely to appear when children are a bit older and parents are out of the most time-intensive stage of parenting. Thus we see this greater sense of purpose in older parenting students who have older children for the most part. Even if some of these older parents have young kids, it is still possible that the years they waited to have children may have allowed them to get a better sense of themselves and gain confidence and self-understanding that may result in a more positive outlook.

PARENTING STUDENTS' MEANING AND PURPOSE BY AGE GROUP



⁵ HMS dataset, 32% of parents aged 25 and older strongly agree with the statement, “I lead a purposeful and meaningful life” versus 22% of non-parents, and 58% of parents aged 25 and older agree or strongly agree with the statement, “I am engaged and interested in my daily activities” versus 50% of non-parents.

FEELINGS ABOUT LIFE PURPOSE AND MEANING: PARENTING VS. NONPARENTING STUDENTS AGE 25+



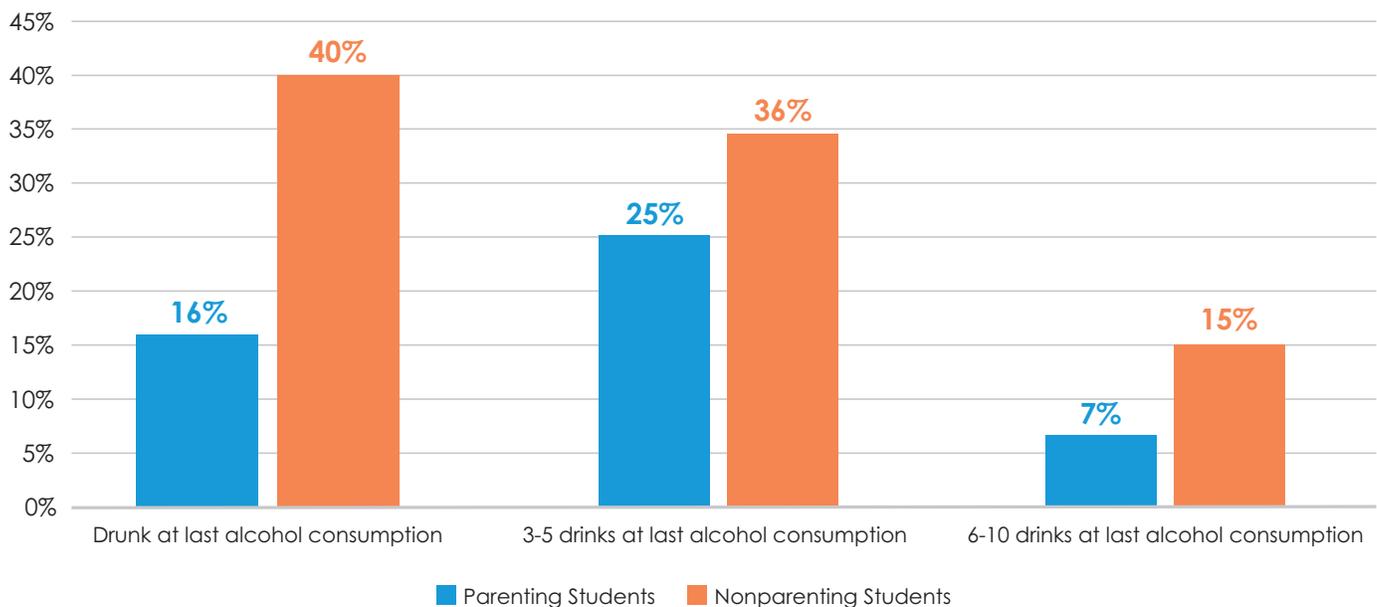


MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE USE

Parenting status seems to be associated with several mental health and emotional well-being advantages. Parenting students report being less likely to have seriously considered attempting suicide than nonparents.⁶ Anecdotal evidence suggests that parenting students view having a child as a turning point in a path that may have previously included drug and alcohol misuse. In fact, drug and alcohol misuse is almost completely absent in this population. The lack of substance misuse may be protective against other mental health issues.

Recalling the last time that they drank alcohol, only 16% of parenting students report having been drunk versus 40% of nonparenting students. Parenting students were also less likely to report having 3-5 drinks⁷ or 6-10 drinks.⁸ Parenting students were significantly less likely to report having had five or more drinks (for males) or four or more drinks (for females) in the past two weeks.⁹ Parenting students were about half as likely as nonparenting students to report doing something they later regretted while under the influence of alcohol. Student parents were more than half as likely to report blacking out from alcohol consumption.

PROBLEMATIC DRINKING BEHAVIORS: PARENTING STUDENTS VS. NONPARENTING STUDENTS



⁶ HMS dataset, 11.5% parents versus 14.7% non-parents

⁷ ACHA dataset, 25.15% versus 35.91% of nonparenting students

⁸ ACHA dataset, 6.96% versus 15.47% of nonparenting students

⁹ ACHA dataset, 31.42% versus 53.88% of nonparenting students



On the other hand, parenting students seem to face other barriers to receiving help when they do have a mental health issue. Overall, parenting students are less aware than nonparenting students of mental health outreach efforts on campus.¹⁰ In addition, parenting students are more likely than nonparenting students to report having trouble paying for mental health care, with 6.3% parents versus 4.9% nonparents reporting that it is "somewhat difficult," 4.2% parents versus 2.7% nonparents reporting "difficult," and 5% parents versus 2.7% nonparents responding "very difficult." Campus counseling services are often not equipped to understand the complexity of life stressors faced by nontraditional parenting students and sometimes these students opt for off-campus care or no care as a result of feeling misunderstood. Compounding matters is the fact that many community college campuses do not offer substantive health services on campus and students at community colleges are less likely to be insured than students at four-year institutions.¹¹ And while most student parents cope well with the extraordinary challenges that they face, and even say that the overall experience of being a student parent is positive, a sizeable minority (roughly one quarter to one third) of these students suffer adverse impacts on their emotional and mental health, including panic attacks and severe anxiety, which often lead to thoughts of dropping out of school. Student parents experiencing these more severe emotional and mental health challenges are disproportionately female, non-White, and recipients of financial aid.

Additionally, further analysis of Hope Center data suggest a clear relationship between multiple forms of basic needs insecurity and depression or anxiety. Parents who had difficulty paying rent, who had been homeless in the past 12 months, who worried about whether food would run out before they had money to buy more, and who had difficulty paying bills, all had significantly higher rates of depressive and anxiety symptoms than parents who did not experience these stressors. These stressors are quite common among parenting students and these data indicate that this population is at risk of significant mental health problems as a result.

¹⁰ HMS dataset, 46.65% parents versus 57.47% non-parents report being aware of these efforts on campus.

¹¹ Institute of Women's Policy Research, "Improving Success in Higher Education through Increased Access to Reproductive Health Services." January 2020. Accessed May 6, 2021: <https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/CERH-Higher-Ec-brief.pdf>.



ACADEMIC BARRIERS AND BEHAVIORS

In the academic realm, the data suggest that parenting students struggle more with their academics, yet seek out academic support more frequently than nonparents. In response to the question, “How has it been to adjust to the academic demands of college since you began as a student at your school?” 5.71% of parents said the adjustment was very easy (versus 8.84% of nonparents), 11.43% of parents said the adjustment was easy (versus 16.59% of nonparents), and 38.57% of parents said the adjustment was somewhat difficult (versus 30.39% of nonparents).¹² Nearly a fifth of parents (19.44%) stated that it was difficult to manage time effectively since starting as a student (versus 14.27% of non-parents) and 11.11% said that time management was very difficult (versus 5.68% of non-parents). We certainly heard about difficulties with time management and juggling multiple responsibilities in our qualitative research.

At the same time, data suggest that parenting students seemed to seek out academic support more frequently than their nonparent counterparts. Close to double the number of parenting students (6.48%) report interacting with academic advisors two to three times per week versus 3.98% of nonparents; 2.78% report interacting with academic advisors every day or nearly every day versus 1.19% of nonparents; and 11.11% report interacting with academic advisors once per week versus 3.98% of nonparents. Parenting students also report more frequent contact with faculty during office hours.¹³ Finally, parenting students report interacting with faculty more frequently outside of class and office hours than their nonparenting counterparts.¹⁴

¹² HMS dataset

¹³ HMS dataset, 5.56% of parents reported interacting with faculty during office hours every day or nearly every day (versus 0.53% of non-parents) and 14.81% of parents reported interacting with faculty during office hours once per week (versus 7.16% of non-parents).

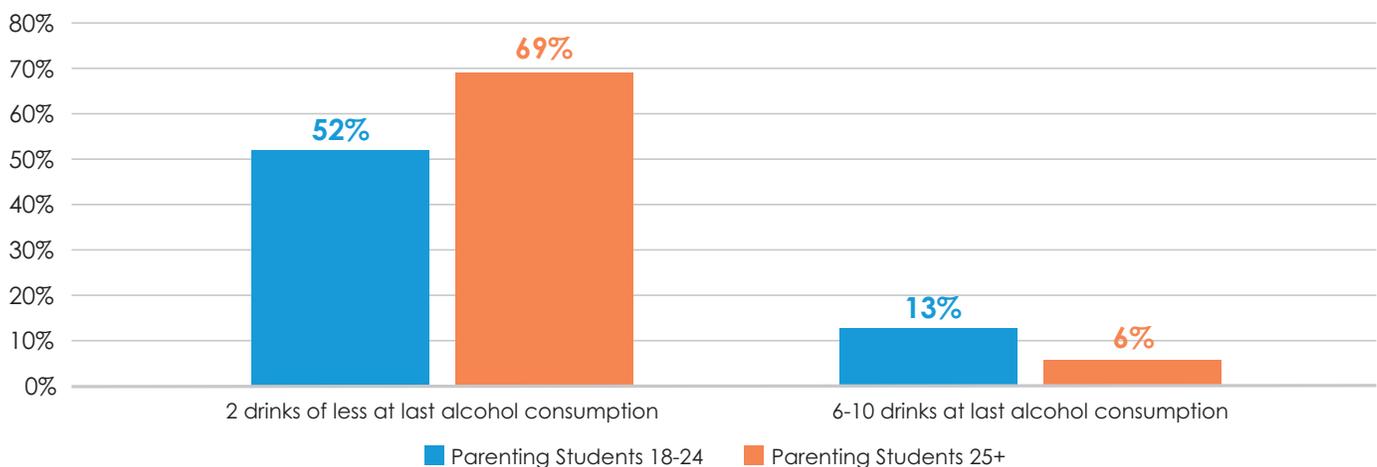
¹⁴ HMS dataset, 15.74% of parents reported this kind of contact two to three times per week (versus 9.68% of non-parents) and 4.63% reported this kind of contact every day or nearly every day (versus 0.66% of non-parents).



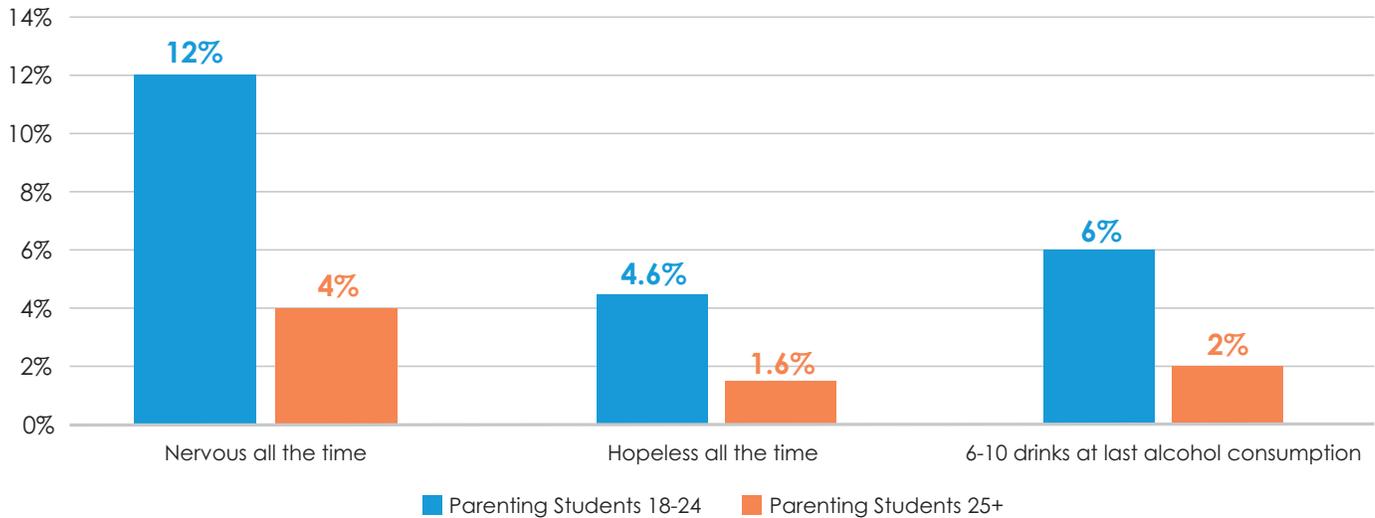
SUBGROUP ANALYSES

When we analyzed data broken down by age, we had some additional interesting findings that help us focus our recommendations and interventions. Overall, student parents seemed more protected from mental health symptoms when compared with their same-age nonparent counterparts. While rates were very similar for parents and nonparents aged 18-24, student parents aged 25 and older were more likely to respond “not at all” to both “Over the last two weeks, how often have you been bothered by: Little interest or pleasure in doing things” (44% parents versus 36% nonparents) as well as “Over the last two weeks, how often have you been bothered by: Feeling down, depressed or hopeless” (43% parents versus 36% nonparents).¹⁵ Significant discrepancies exist in problematic drinking for the younger parenting student age group versus older parenting students. While older parenting students report almost no instances of drinking more than two drinks, almost 15% of younger parenting students report drinking 6-10 drinks the last time they drank. Younger parenting students tend to have lower confidence in themselves and believe they are less resilient than older student parents. For example, younger parents are nearly twice as likely to strongly disagree with the statement, “I am able to adapt when changes occur” as compared to older parenting students. The same is true of strong disagreement with the statement, “I tend to bounce back after illness, injury, or other hardships.” Younger parents are three times as likely as older parenting students to report having felt nervous all the time in the past 30 days, four times as likely to report feeling hopeless, and five times as likely to report feeling worthless. Younger parents are almost twice as likely as older student parents to report feeling that they lack companionship, twice as likely to report feeling left out, and almost twice as likely to report feeling isolated. Younger parents are also 1.5 times more likely than older student parents to report having made a suicide attempt and about twice as likely to report having thought “very often” in the past year about killing themselves. These “protective” findings in older student parents in both surveys suggest the possibility that older student parents might serve as good mentors to younger student parents who seem to struggle more.

PROBLEMATIC DRINKING: PARENTING STUDENTS 25+ VS. NONPARENTING STUDENTS 18-24

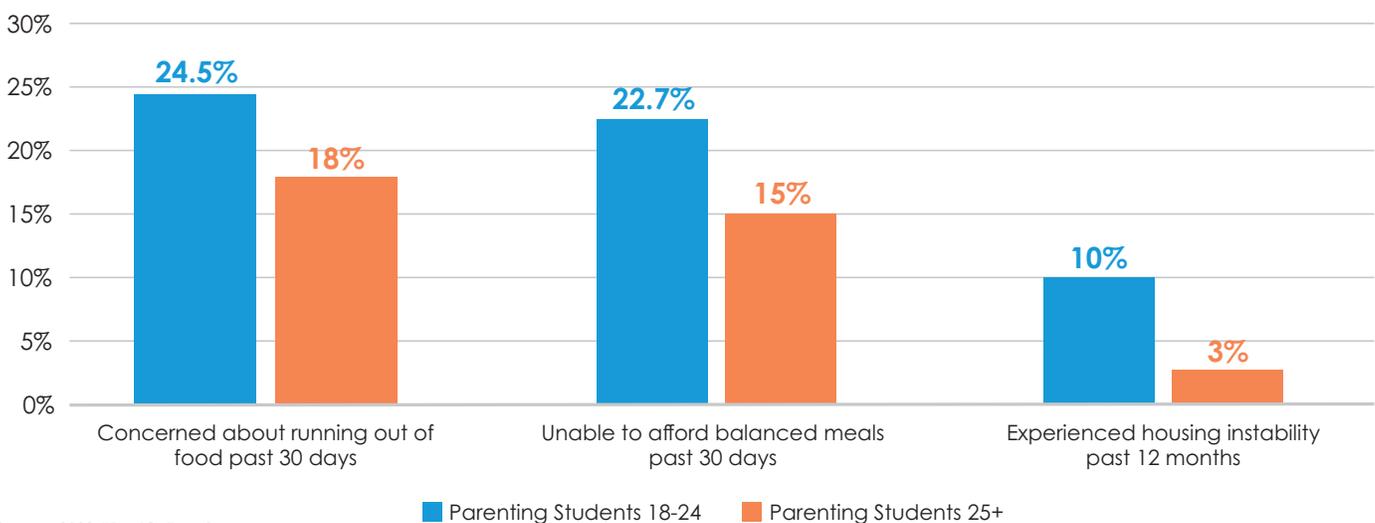


PAST 30 DAYS MENTAL HEALTH PROFILE: PARENTING STUDENTS 25+ VS. NONPARENTING STUDENTS 18-24



2020 #RealCollege Survey data suggest that older student parents were doing better than younger parents in other key areas of their lives that may relate to mental health. In the academic realm, older student parents were more likely than younger student parents to be getting As (37% versus 23%) and less likely to be failing (1.9% versus 3.04%). Younger parents also seemed to struggle more with basic needs, including being more concerned about running out of food (24.5% versus 18%); not being able to afford to eat balanced meals in the past 30 days (22.7% versus 15%); and experiencing more housing instability (10% of younger parents have moved twice in the past 12 months versus 3% of older parents). Marital status is worth noting an important difference between younger and older student parents that contributes to differentials in their well-being and basic needs security. Older student parents are much more likely to be married than younger student parents. Marriage often means greater income, better parenting supports, and more free time to study, among other advantages.

BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY OF PARENTING STUDENTS BY AGE GROUP



Source: 2020 #RealCollegeSurvey



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES TO SUPPORT THE MENTAL HEALTH OF STUDENT PARENTS

Some of our findings are not entirely surprising, while others are not what we might expect. For example, the finding that parenting students face increased financial stressors and difficulty accessing and paying for mental health care services is not unexpected. We did find some interesting protective factors that might form the basis of further interventions to protect the mental health of parenting students. For example, parenting students seem to have more contact with faculty and academic support services than nonparenting students. As a result, training campus staff members to recognize and help parenting students who might be struggling with their mental health might make sense. Educating faculty and staff on the unique stressors that face parenting students and ways to help might be particularly effective. As a basic first step, staff and faculty should know to ask students if they are parents, recognizing that many student parents do not offer this information voluntarily due to a fear of being treated differently from other students. If faculty and staff do not ask if students have children, they will not fully appreciate the stressors some students are facing. Overall, data show some rich opportunities for nuanced interventions that truly take into account the nature of the problem. This examination has unearthed an important distinction between older and younger parenting students, with younger parenting students seemingly in a more difficult situation. This insight especially should help guide how interventions in the student parent population are structured.

The following recommendations are meant to help undergraduate institutions prioritize the unique needs of parenting students. This population constitutes a significant portion of the overall student body (over 20%), and evidence suggests that student parents face unique challenges. Data suggests that they may be more at risk of mental health issues and may face greater barriers to

seeking care than their nonparent counterparts. Therefore, undergraduate institutions must have specific strategies to support these students.

Recommendation #1: Train counselors and other on-campus mental health providers on unique stressors faced by student parents and specifically in trauma-informed care. Train faculty and staff in understanding and being sensitive to the unique stressors faced by parenting students to allow for a culture shift whereby parenting students are fully factored into professorial and staff decisions and policies.

In a convening of college mental health experts and student parent representatives in August 2020, participants repeatedly raised the issue of counselors and other mental health professionals on college campuses having limited knowledge of the unique stressors and experiences of parenting students. This theme recurred in our qualitative research as well as in the literature review. Parenting students reported rarely using on-campus mental health resources or feeling misunderstood by counselors when they did. In one study conducted by Generation Hope in 2020, less than one-third of parenting students reported feeling comfortable accessing mental health services on campus.¹⁶ College counseling centers should also include clinical social workers and others who have family and marital training and should be sure to be connected with community resources.

The unique stressors faced by parenting students are real and counselors need to be aware of these stressors to serve students effectively. In our research, we uncovered the following major sources of stress among parenting students that are in most cases unique to this population:

- Parenting students were much more likely than nonparenting students to have a history of trauma.

¹⁶ Generation Hope, "National Student-Parent Survey Results and Recommendations: Uncovering the Student-Parent Experience and Its Effect on College Success." May 2020. Accessed May 7, 2021: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ed7f7e97e1c361545410fe4/t/5f8799dad29aa2b428e74f3/1605925281914/GH_%23StudentParentSuccess+Report_Final.pdf.

Trauma might relate to rejection by family (especially in the case of students who were teen parents), sexual assault and domestic violence, and trauma related to basic needs insecurities such as homelessness. This realization is important, as it suggests that counselors should be looking out for trauma responses and inquiring about traumatic events when treating parenting students.¹⁷

- Parenting students face basic needs insecurities at much higher rates than nonparenting students. In a 2020 study conducted by the Hope Center, researchers found that 32 percent of parenting students experienced at least moderate depression or anxiety associated with basic needs insecurity. Basic needs insecurity generally refers to an inability to consistently find adequate food, water, shelter, and/or safety. Levels of basic needs insecurity are generally lower among nonparenting students. 2020 data from HMS indicate that 21.3% of parenting students describe their financial situation as “always stressful” compared to only 14% of nonparents. In 2020 data from the Hope Center, parents reported having more difficulty paying rent than nonparents (44% of parents versus 32% of nonparents). Parents were also more likely to have not paid utilities at some point in the past 12 months (43% parents versus 18% nonparents), more likely to have borrowed money (46% parents versus 35% nonparents), and more likely to go into collections (29% parents versus 9% nonparents). Not surprisingly, they were more likely to be worried about having enough money for food (19% of parents responding “often true” versus 11% of nonparents). Parenting students experience more homelessness (4% of parents versus 2% of nonparents). They are also much more likely to work full time than nonparents, often adding stressors related to time management and exhaustion that are not seen among nonparenting students to the same degree. Data from the Hope Center show that these kinds of basic needs insecurities are associated with anxiety and depression. For example, parents who had been homeless in the last 12 months, parents who were often worried about food running out before they had money to buy more, and parents who had difficulty paying utility bills all had higher rates of depression and anxiety than parents who did not report these issues. Counselors may need to be trained to discuss needs insecurities and be well-versed in supports offered both on and off campus to help students who are struggling with basic needs. It is important to train counselors to refer students to available assistance and to think about campus emergency assistance funds, campus food banks, and social workers beyond the counseling department who can help students navigate these services.

- Parenting students face high levels of guilt associated with the time that their studies take away from being with their children. One qualitative research participant commented, “I often feel very guilty for not being able to give my children my full attention and also for not having this done before I had them. They do not intentionally make me feel guilty or voice their opinions about how they feel about me being so busy. But I feel guilty for telling them ‘no’ to certain things or blowing up with anger because I’m stressed and frustrated with school.” Another shared: “There is a lot of gray area surrounding neglecting family in the present to secure time with them in the future. And in the back of my head, I can’t justify giving up time with my child now because developmentally these are the years that matter most. It is very frustrating for my wife to want me to be more involved, but also recognizing that I am doing something for the family that she wants to support me in. It’s just a tough situation.” These sentiments were pervasive in our research and would be an important phenomenon to understand for counselors, other support staff such as social workers, professors, and advisors, among others.

- Parenting students are more likely to be from low-income working-class communities that sometimes view therapy as a threat. Many people from low-income communities have collective trauma regarding police and mental health that may make them wary of seeking services. They may also experience domestic violence and other threats to health and safety that therapists are required to report. It is important for therapists to be attuned to these hesitations and to offer an empathic and gentle approach that will not confirm existing biases or concerns about therapy and mental health treatment. Parenting students are also more likely to be BIPOC students, and therefore often face multiple, intersecting barriers to seeking care. Cultural stigmas against therapy, in addition to socioeconomic and other barriers, may also make seeking help difficult for these students.¹⁸

In addition, our research indicates that parenting students would benefit from greater flexibility and understanding, especially from their professors. Our survey research found that 57% of student parents report having an experience with a faculty member who was unsympathetic to their situation as parenting students. One parent in our qualitative research shared a specific example of a professor not being accommodating to her needing to take time away from schoolwork to care for a sick child: “One example has been with both of my kids were sick and wanting to be by my side and I had an exam that I had to miss ... That experience was pretty difficult. I had a professor who was not sympathetic at all to the plight of parents and I felt she was being very demeaning in her responses and the requests to retake the exam. I wrote to the dean as

17 Ascend at The Aspen Institute, “Accelerating Postsecondary Success for Parents: Leveraging the Two-Generation Approach in Practice.” Accessed May 6, 2021: https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Ascend_Postsecondary-Success-for-Parents_Practice_20181.pdf.

18 As shared by student parent expert Susan Warfield, Program Director, Student Parent Help Center, University of Minnesota.

a last resort and was able to reach her by phone after a while. The dean was unable to help, as she said, and I was forced to have to retake the class entirely after missing such a major exam. The experience made me feel very singled out for being a parent. It was seen as making an excuse to not be able to attend due to my children being sick. I think the issue was more indicative of the school culture than just an issue with one professor or class."

Importantly, this participant details feeling "singled out" as a result of not being accommodated by the professor (or the dean). Indeed, a lack of flexibility on the part of faculty in response to parenting needs can contribute to a feeling of being unwelcome or not belonging on campus. Sensitivity training for faculty to help them better understand what student parents go through may also be helpful, as demonstrated by this anecdote from a focus group participant: "I haven't had that many instances where my kids affected my school, but one time I was a few minutes late and had to duck outside to take a phone call during class. My daughter was sick and my husband was calling to tell me her fever was getting higher. The professor thought I was making an excuse and asked if I was going to say my kids ate my homework next time." In this instance, policy changes alone would not suffice, but more would need to be done to ensure that professors do not make comments that make student parents feel uncomfortable or unwelcome.

Recommendation #2: Create spaces on campus that meet the specific needs of student parents and help foster a sense of belonging among these students. This accommodation includes encouraging creation of spaces and activities for children at all school events.

A common theme in our research with parenting students is this sense of not belonging on campus or somehow being invisible, which we have discussed throughout these recommendations. As mentioned previously, a sense of belonging and community is often a strong protective factor against mental health issues, especially when other major stressors, such as housing and financial insecurity, are also present.

One way to increase the sense of belonging and make student parents feel more "visible" on campus in a somewhat concrete manner is to establish spaces on campus that are tailored to student parents' unique needs. Some examples include:

- Designate lactation rooms for new student mothers. While these rooms can certainly be shared with faculty and staff, ensuring that there is a sufficient number of them and that their locations are convenient for students as well as for faculty and staff is important. In addition, schools should communicate to students that these rooms are available for their use. A good example of this accommodation is Portland State University's Services for Students with Children, which provides 13 lactation rooms and family study rooms across campus.

- Create family-friendly spaces in libraries and other common areas. In our research a number of student parents discussed times when they had to bring their children to campus and found that the environment was not conducive to children's needs. Libraries can have "family study rooms" that may be used by parents who have to bring their children to campus and still want to be able to study and get work done without disturbing other students. Common dining areas may also be equipped with items such as highchairs and child-friendly utensils to ensure that student parents feel comfortable and accommodated bringing their children there.
- Create special spaces for parenting students to participate in networking, mentoring, and affinity groups. These spaces will be equipped as needed to allow children to attend, but the focus here is to protect space on campus for parenting students to meet and connect with each other.

Even if student parents do not always use these types of accommodations and spaces, their existence on campus can send a powerful signal that student parents are welcome, are encouraged to be who they are, and, most importantly, that they belong on campus.

Our research clearly showed that parenting students were interested in participating in more on-campus events and activities, but they face a key barrier: securing childcare. It is only natural that parenting students will feel more welcome on campus if they have more opportunities to participate in on-campus events and activities. We focus on the feeling of connectedness because it is central to positive mental health and is a significant challenge for many parenting students. Event planning that includes built-in spaces or options for children and communicates to parenting students that their children are more than welcome to attend may address this concern.

Successfully integrating children into on-campus events and activities depends on several key factors, including:

- Developing appropriate spaces and activities for children during the event.
- Securing funds to equip appropriate spaces and designate a childcare provider to supervise.
- Communicating frequently with students that their children are welcome to attend designated events or activities and specifically describing how their children will be attended to during the event to ensure comfort with the arrangement.
- Establishing initiatives that focus specifically on welcoming student parents on campus. For example, the University of Oregon has a Family Friendly Campus committee, an interdepartmental alliance that specifically focuses on including all families in the campus community and at campus events and activities.

Our qualitative research indicates the extent to which parenting students connect lack of child-friendly spaces on campus with feelings of belonging. As one participant put it, "Since I can't find a daycare right now, I can't even go to the campus to use any of the few open resources, such as going to the library, because I can't exactly take a toddler in there. So there is no sense of belonging for me." The lack of accommodations for this student's lifestyle understandably makes her feel as though the challenges she faces are not being considered by the institution. Another participant shared an experience that indicates the importance of ensuring that relevant faculty and staff are understanding about the need for child-friendly spaces and activities on campus: "I took my kids to one event and it was very awkward. At one point they were giving out free pizza, soda, and chips. I gave my pizza and chips to my kids to share and a faculty member walking by said, 'You know that's for students of the college, right?' They said it kind of laughing, but we left shortly after that." While including children in activities and events is an important first step, educating faculty and staff to welcome all students and support their sense of belonging is also important.

Recommendation #3: Facilitate affinity groups and mentoring programs for older and younger parenting students.

Parenting students express a strong interest in meeting and supporting each other through the process of attending school while parenting, but very few have a sense that such opportunities exist on campus and do not know how to meet other parenting students. One student parent in our qualitative research expressed a deep sense of social isolation on campus stemming from not being able to connect with other student parents: "A sense of social isolation is pretty much an all-the-time experience as a student parent for me. Even though I'm not too much older than most other students, most of them don't have kids, and the ones that do don't have as many as I do. Which makes it difficult to make good friends at school. On the flip side, most of my friends who have kids aren't in school, so they don't understand what it's like to have to manage all of these things at once. As a parent and a student, it's immensely difficult to find people who can relate to you, and sometimes it feels nearly impossible to have a social life at all." Almost all of the participants in our qualitative research sample expressed keen interest in meeting with other parenting students, both for advice about specific barriers and issues they face, as well as for general connections with others who have similar experiences.

There is also an important opportunity for schools to facilitate mentorship programs or student clubs, particularly ones in which older parenting students mentor younger parenting students. National research conducted by both the NCHA and HMS studies in 2020 indicate stark differences in the experiences of parenting students aged 18-24 and

those aged 25 and older. In most cases, older parenting students (those 25 and older) exhibited resilience and a wide range of adaptive and protective practices and skills and reported lower rates of mental health issues than even the general college population. On the other hand, younger parenting students (those aged 18-24) exhibited few protective and adaptive skills and experienced substance use issues and mental health symptoms at higher rates than their non-parent counterparts of the same age range. For example, parenting students ages 18-24 are nearly twice as likely to strongly disagree with the statement, "I am able to adapt when changes occur" as compared to parenting students aged 25 and older. Younger parenting students are three times as likely as parenting students aged 25 and older to report having felt nervous all the time in the past 30 days, four times as likely to report feeling hopeless, and five times as likely to report feeling worthless. Younger parenting students are almost twice as likely as older students to report feeling that they lack companionship, twice as likely to report feeling left out, and almost twice as likely to report feeling isolated. There were especially significant discrepancies in problematic drinking for the 18-24 parenting student group versus parenting students aged 25 and older. While parenting students aged 25 and up report almost no instances of drinking more than two drinks, almost 15% of parenting students ages 18-24 report drinking 6-10 drinks the last time they consumed alcohol. Research from the Hope Center indicates that basic needs insecurity may also be higher among parenting students aged 18-24 versus those 25 and older, with 52.2% of 18-25-year-old parents reporting difficulty paying rent versus 43% of parents 25 and older. Younger parents were also more likely to have lost their job during the COVID-19 pandemic as compared to older parenting students. Older parents also seem to have better outcomes academically, being more likely to have an A average and less likely to be failing.

Recommendation #4: Create policies that allow for flexibility for parenting students in the classroom.

Our research indicates that parenting students are much more likely to live off campus (and sometimes quite far away) than their nonparenting peers, and they are also much more likely to work a full-time job (sometimes more than one job).¹⁹ For example, the 2020 #RealCollege Survey results from 2020 indicate that 68% of parenting students work full time as compared to 39% of nonparenting students. These factors, along with the fact that many parents do not have reliable childcare, make abiding by rigid class schedules and faculty policies such as hard copies of assignments needing to be delivered in person difficult for parenting students. The lack of flexibility in the classroom can create particularly challenging situations for parenting students in ways that may not affect their nonparenting counterparts. Rigid class schedules can lead to parents needing to work multiple part-time jobs

¹⁹ Our original survey research suggests that 88% of student parents live off campus. 77% of student parents in this sample had a paid job, compared to 51% of nonparenting students.

or graveyard shifts, speaking to a need for asynchronous learning options as well as prioritization of student parents in class registration processes to ensure that they are able to create a schedule that is as flexible as possible. As one parent in our qualitative research shared: "It is often difficult to schedule classes as most are during the workday or school day for my son. I also have a challenge when it comes to finding any additional time to study or work on an assignment outside of what my tight schedule will allow for. My job can some days require me to have video calls and juggle those without childcare and while trying to attend an online class is a challenge as well." During the pandemic, this kind of schedule rigidity did not make things any easier, as one qualitative research participant noted: "One of my professors made it mandatory to attend Zoom by basing his quiz/test questions on his lectures ... As you know, children are very unpredictable, so it's hard focusing on his Zooms without any help with my kids, which is why I had them in the three hours afternoon preschool, but then the pandemic started ... I was able to handle being a full-time student and parent before this pandemic, but now I feel really overwhelmed these days."

As a way of addressing scheduling and caretaking conflicts, we recommend that higher education institutions create a series of policies that allow for greater classroom flexibility. Orienting faculty to these policy changes and supporting them in their implementation will be important. These policies are best implemented by faculty and having them understand the purpose of these policies is important. Some policies that might allow for greater flexibility include:

- Post-COVID-19, allowing students to turn in assignments virtually or in-person. Aligning campus calendars with surrounding school district calendars helps parents coordinate schedules and know when they will need to make childcare arrangements to attend class.
- Allowing students to step out of the classroom if they need to take an emergency call. This allowance should apply to all students, and parenting students will likely benefit, as they are often juggling many responsibilities and may need to step out more frequently than students who do not have children.
- Providing opportunities to connect virtually outside of the classroom. When parenting students have to miss optional study sessions or class sessions due to work or childcare demands, they can feel even more isolated from their peers and professors and perhaps suffer academically as a result. In addition to in-person sessions, offering opportunities for virtual review sessions, study groups, and discussion boards for students who need more flexibility will be important. Encouraging parenting students to attend and participate in these opportunities to ensure that they feel welcome and comfortable will be important. In addition, when possible, faculty could offer virtual office hours or be amenable to meeting with students virtually if needed and detail this option in course syllabi. Offer more evening classes and classes outside of normal work

hours. For the large portion of parenting students who work full time, attending classes may be an issue when they are during traditional 9-5 work hours. In order to better accommodate the specific needs of parent students, it could be especially helpful to offer more evening and weekend classes so that parenting students who work and help their child with school have more opportunities to attend.

- Create policies whereby professors allow for excused absences for students whose children are sick or do not have childcare. Language around this accommodation may be listed on syllabi to make sure that parenting students are fully aware that they are excused if a child is sick. The University of Minnesota recently enacted a school-wide policy whereby the same rules apply to sick children as to sick students. That is, a student's illness and a dependent's illness are treated the same way in the attendance policy — if a student is allowed a certain number of missed days due to illness, the same applies to that student's dependents. This kind of universal, far-reaching policy can be helpful to ensure that parenting students are not receiving unfair or unequal treatment and helps move the school culture toward broader inclusiveness of parenting students.

Recommendation #5: Regularly collect data on students who are parents — their mental health, their needs, their utilization of on-campus services, their feelings of connectedness and belonging on campus — in order to inform how to best support these students.

Slightly more than one in five undergraduate students are parents, but this fact almost always comes as a surprise to most people. While national surveys such as Healthy Minds and the National College Health Assessment ask about parenting status, many schools do not collect data on parenting students and often are unaware of how significant a portion of the student population they are. Even when schools collect data on parenting status, additional information isn't collected to assess the unique needs of student parents, specifically about how much they feel connected to campus and sufficiently accommodated. Because this is a population that is at high risk of attrition, it is in the universities' best interest to understand the challenges that these students face and how best to support them.

Our research with parenting students confirmed their interest in having their experiences documented by their school. One participant shared, "I think that they should hold a survey to find out anonymously what parents are going through and then from there build some form of program." Another participant suggested, "I think colleges and universities can do a better job by overall reaching out and having polls and seeing the demographic of the students they have as well as requesting feedback on what the students would like to have. I think they could

have more programs or workshops or even geared sessions where student parents can come and work.”

These comments make clear that parenting students feel that most schools are not making enough of an effort to find out what student parents need. By surveying students and collecting data, schools will not only have a better understanding of their student population, but they will also signal to parenting students that schools want to hear their voices. Our research also makes clear that parenting students do not simply want new programs designed for them - they want to participate in their creation.

Recommendation #6: Schools should create purposeful plans to help address the basic needs of parenting students.

As noted previously, parenting students often face unique stressors when it comes to basic needs, such as adequate housing, financial support, and childcare, among other things. While schools are not always in a position to provide a wide range of services directly to students, there are actions they can take to help students obtain the necessary support.

- Create an information hub on resources available to help students with their basic needs. Students often report that they did not know about the full range of services available to them or found the process and system frustratingly fragmented. Schools can centralize information about resources and supports for basic needs by consolidating resource lists and publishing this information ubiquitously online and across campus. Schools may even benefit from forming a Basic Needs Committee to conduct an inventory of all relevant services and identify existing gaps to ensure that everything is included.
- Provide guided application support. Having systems in place through which students who are applying for local or federal benefits may receive assistance in filling out applications is important. This helps to ensure that students are not intimidated by complex application processes and allows them to apply for as many benefits as possible.
- Facilitate referrals to off-campus services for students who need them. A wide range of staff and faculty members should be aware of external resources available to students in need. Faculty and staff also should know where to send a student who may need assistance, which is usually a Care Manager or similar role.

Recommendation #7: Identify strategies to ensure that parents have reliable access to childcare, including on-campus childcare options.

Roughly 53% of student parents leave college without attaining a degree, a significantly higher rate than among their nonparent counterparts.²⁰ One intervention that can

make a big difference in this rate of noncompletion is the availability of convenient childcare, most notably on-campus childcare. For example, at Monroe Community College in Rochester, New York, student parents who used the on-campus childcare center were nearly three times as likely to graduate as those who did not utilize these services.²¹

In our research, the struggle to find good childcare while also trying to succeed at school was prominent. One in four student parents reported having no help with childcare. Half of respondents to our survey said that their college or university offers some form of help with childcare. As one participant put it: “Right now the biggest challenge is the lack of daycare options. I moved to a new state during COVID-19 and despite having my name on waitlists before I got here. There are no openings. My husband has to work and it’s almost impossible to schedule all my classes for when he is here, so I just have to figure out how to make it work with my baby running around during class. I tend to focus on her more than class, but the classes are recorded so I just watch them again while she’s sleeping.” Another participant listed lack of childcare as one of the key barriers to completing her education: “Not having enough money, not being able to have another or different job due to lack of childcare, not knowing if I will be able to complete my internship and degree due to lack of childcare, not having any support system, are sources of stress for me.” Students were nearly unanimous in their desire for more on-campus childcare options.

In an effort to expand childcare options for student parents, some schools can access federal funding through the Child Care Access Means Parents in Schools (CCAMPIS) program. Attempts to expand this funding have been ongoing. School administrators should inquire about their eligibility for this funding and ensure that they are receiving funds if they qualify. In cases where on-campus childcare is not feasible, schools would do well to have care managers on campus to provide resources and training to relevant staff to equip them to help students find childcare off campus and obtain financial support. In addition, there are several ways that on-campus childcare centers can be extended to support student parents, as well as assist them in applying for financial support for off-campus childcare when on-campus services do not exist:

- Consider expanding existing childcare facilities to be hubs of various forms of support for student parents, such as places where student parents can meet with each other or where they may obtain information on other types of assistance. Some campuses assign a specialized advisor to on-campus childcare centers to provide tailored support to student parents in a convenient location.

20 <https://qz.com/1750281/childcare-for-student-parents-can-boost-college-completion-rates/>

21 <https://qz.com/1750281/childcare-for-student-parents-can-boost-college-completion-rates/>

- Consider a co-op model. In this type of model, student parents devote a certain number of hours per week to work in the childcare center and in turn have their own fees waived or reduced.
- Assist students in finding and funding off-campus childcare. If on-campus childcare is not a possibility, campuses can assist students by helping them find and pay for childcare near campus. Administrators can help students find and apply for federal, state/local, institutional, and private funds to help them pay for childcare.

Recommendation #8: Make parenting students feel more “visible” by representing them on campus materials and creating customized orientation materials.

Across the board, parenting students report feeling less welcome on campuses than nonparenting students. In our survey research, 54% of student parents said that they have been made to feel less than welcome on at least one occasion. The figure was even higher (67%) among younger student parents ages 18-29. Only 37% of student parents said that they felt that their college or university was supportive of student parents. In recent Healthy Minds Study data, more than twice as many parenting students as their nonparenting counterparts strongly disagree with the statement, “I feel like I belong on campus.”²² Parenting students are also much less likely than nonparenting students to report having found a community or group at school where they feel like they belong.²³ Parenting students report feeling invisible or that their parenting status is never addressed. This lack of inclusion was a common sentiment in our qualitative research. One participant summed it up well: “Not very welcome. We never talked about student parents or anything like that. They basically treated me as they did when I was first starting college at 19 without kids. They never mentioned any resources or help for student parents at all. I didn’t know any of this was even a possibility.” Another student commented, “I definitely feel like more of an outsider.” Another student said that wanting to “quit” was easier when you feel unwelcome or feel like an outsider on campus.

Because a sense of connection and belonging have a strong impact on mental health, schools need to address this lack of inclusion as part of any effort to support the emotional well-being of parenting students.²⁴ There are a number of steps schools can take to improve parenting students’ sense of belonging, some of which will be elaborated in subsequent recommendations. Here are some of the key recommendations in this domain:

- Make sure school materials represent parenting students. Too often, school materials, such as orientation and recruitment brochures, depict only one type of student, usually a young person between ages 18 and 24 who does not have any dependents. While seemingly a small step, making school materials more representative of the wide range of students enrolled may make a difference in the extent to which students feel recognized and included. The sense of being “invisible” may be partially mitigated by showing parenting students that they are being officially recognized as a key part of the student body.
- Make sure orientation materials and programming include explicit information that will be particularly important for parenting students. Many campuses have support systems and assistance programs to help students with dependents, yet in our research, we have found that more often than not, students are unaware of this assistance. Highlighting any special programming or assistance relevant to parenting students will serve a dual purpose: ensuring that people who need these services or assistance are aware of their existence and signaling that the school is thinking actively about how to support parenting students in particular. Listing family housing and child care centers in all admissions material is important. While the assistance may be available for a wide range of students, orientation materials can make a special point to acknowledge their usefulness for parenting students to contribute to the process of making parenting students more “visible.”

22 2.72% of parents strongly disagree that they feel like they belong on campus versus 1.94% of non-parents.

23 27.22% of parents agree that they have found a community on campus versus 37.18% of non-parents.

24 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Connectedness as a strategic direction for the prevention of suicidal behavior. http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/Suicide_Strategic_Direction_Full_Version-a.pdf.



CONCLUSION

Parenting students make up a significant portion of the general undergraduate student body in this country, but they are often overlooked. This group demonstrates a great deal of resilience and an ability to handle an overwhelming amount of pressure and competing demands. In some ways, their status as parents is protective against emotional distress, but there is also abundant evidence to suggest that parenting students may experience high levels of anxiety, stress, and depression. This distress is compounded by frequent struggles with basic needs (adequate food, affordable housing, etc.) and a general feeling of isolation and lack of connection to campus. There are many ways that universities can support the mental health of student parents, including everything from better understanding their needs to helping them find affordable childcare. By supporting parenting students, schools will also be supporting their children, thus fostering the well-being of the next generation of students.



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