



Supporting America's Student Parents

Toolkit of Promising Practices for Colleges and Universities



Institutional
Practices



Case
Studies



Expert
Interviews



Taking
Action



TODAY'S STUDENTS
COALITION



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Introduction

Maria attends evening classes at her local community college three nights a week while working full-time as a medical assistant. She's pursuing her associate degree in nursing, never misses class, and completes every assignment. She is an exemplary student whose main goal is to obtain a career that promises better pay and stability for her and her 8-year-old daughter. By every measure of academic engagement, she expects to succeed in college.

But the sad reality for learners like Maria is: [nationally, 71% of student parents report that caring for dependents could cause them to withdraw from college, and 73% cite financial circumstances as a potential reason to stop out.](#) And, despite growing awareness of the unique circumstances parenting students often face—any child care gap, car repair, medical bill or other seemingly minor events remain major threats to their educational pursuits.

It's a stark paradox that more than 4 million student parents confront everyday in higher education. As learners, parents demonstrate higher levels of engagement and academic preparedness, but they complete college at a much lower rate than their peers without children.

Fortunately, community colleges have started to recognize that student parents are a significant portion of their enrollment, sometimes between 30-50%, and [nearly half of all student parents throughout the country attend community colleges.](#) Leading colleges have responded to their needs with intentional, systematic approaches to support their success.

In *Supporting America's Student Parents*, the [first policy brief](#) in this series of new resources from Today's Students Coalition (TSC), we make the case why federal and state policymakers should prioritize the parenting student population. TSC's *Toolkit of Promising Practices for Colleges and Universities*, the second publication of the series, combines qualitative insights from the field with a review of existing national research. We interviewed a range of experts, including institutional leaders, program administrators, policy advocates, and practitioners working directly with college students who have children, to better understand emerging and effective practices. These conversations coincided with a review of research and implementation guidance from organizations such as the Aspen Institute, Generation Hope, and other national groups that partner with postsecondary institutions to advance innovations supporting student parents. Together, these sources provided both on-the-ground perspectives and broader evidence on strategies that improve access, persistence, and success for student parents across diverse institutional contexts.



State Policy Context

While this toolkit focuses on institutional practices, state policy creates enabling conditions. New Mexico’s combination of free college (through the [Opportunity Scholarship](#)) and [expanded child care subsidies](#) (400% of the federal poverty level income eligibility) created what administrators describe as an “unintentional two-generation policy” that dramatically improves what institutions can offer. [California’s](#) mandate for priority registration ensures equity across institutions. [Texas](#) requires each college to have a student-parent liaison, building capacity statewide.

These policies matter. But institutions can’t wait for perfect policy conditions. The colleges profiled throughout the toolkit show us meaningful support is possible in various policy contexts, with different levels of state investment, and across different institutional circumstances.

For more on state policies, see [Supporting America’s Student Parents](#).



UNDERSTANDING THE BARRIERS

Child Care: The Fundamental Challenge

Child care is the biggest barrier, says Catron Allred, director of the Early Childhood Center of Excellence at Santa Fe Community College. The data bears this out. [Over half of American families live in child care deserts](#), areas where the demand for child care far exceeds the supply. Even when child care exists, it’s often prohibitively expensive. [In no state can student parents afford both child care and in-state tuition while working less than 30 hours per week at minimum wage](#).

However, the child care challenge isn’t just about full-time care. Many student parents work and need part-time care to attend classes, meet with advisors, or use tutoring services. Others have full-time child care during traditional hours but need evening or weekend options when they can take courses. The mismatch between available child care and student schedules creates an ongoing crisis of access.

Financial Pressure: Working to Afford School

[Over a third of student parents have incomes below the federal poverty level](#). They face greater food and housing insecurity than their non-parenting peers. They struggle with rent, groceries, gas, and the basic costs of raising children while pursuing an education.

Time Poverty: 74 Fewer Hours Per Week

[Student parents have, on average, 74 fewer discretionary hours per week than their non-parenting peers](#). They’re splitting attention between academics and caregiving, often working full-time while taking classes, and managing complex schedules of child care, work, and coursework.

Traditional campus operating hours often assume learners have time flexibility that student parents usually don't have. Getting to an advisor's office or accessing tutoring services during these hours may require taking time off work, finding additional child care, or missing class.

Cultural Barriers: Feeling Invisible

Many student parents struggle with finding a sense of belonging at their college or as if they are invisible, lacking resources or support services available to address their unique needs. [National research shows 50% of student parents don't feel they belong on campus, and only 37% feel their institution is supportive of student parents.](#)

Dr. Lucia Rodriguez, who leads family-focused initiatives at El Paso Community College, found that parenting students wanted a space designed for them. The absence of a space designed specifically for parenting students signaled to their students that they were afterthoughts rather than a part of the institution's mission. When student parents do not feel they belong, they report feeling isolated from peers and uncertain whether bringing their children to campus events is appropriate.



THE CASE FOR SUPPORTING STUDENT PARENTS

Universal Design: When You Support Parents, You Support Everyone

"We aren't doing things FOR them, but WITH them. Student parents are the experts. Lean into what student parents tell you," Allred said. "Serving student parents is a universal design principle. If we serve student parents well, it will help other students, too."

Student parents aren't a niche population; at Madison College in Wisconsin, 42% of students are parents of minor children, and 50% have some sort of caregiving responsibility. At Santa Fe Community College, [30% of degree-seeking students have children](#). At El Paso Community College, the figure is roughly one in three students.

But even beyond the numbers, student parents represent a concentrated version of the challenges many of today's learners face. Adult students, working students, first-generation students, and students with any caregiving responsibilities all benefit from the solutions designed with parenting students in mind.

The colleges interviewed for this toolkit consistently found that investing in infrastructure for student parents strengthened support for their broader student populations. As one administrator noted, student parents "tend to be the most time-limited" students, so designing for their needs creates systems that work for everyone.

Intergenerational Impact: Investing in the Next Generation

Colleges that invest in student parents are making a two-generation impact: parents earn credentials that lead to better jobs and economic security, and children see their parents succeed and develop their own educational aspirations. Research shows [children of college graduates are significantly more likely to pursue higher education themselves](#). They also [do better socioeconomically](#) than those of parents without a higher education.

Dr. William Serrata, president of El Paso Community College, [frames it this way](#), “When student parents feel welcome and supported on campus, they are more likely to continue their studies and achieve their educational and professional goals. They become role models for their children, illustrating the value of education and creating a college-going culture, which will have a generational impact for years to come.”



TIP

Design for your most time-constrained students first.

Student parents are often the most time-limited people on campus. When you build systems that work for them, you build systems that work for everyone. See more in our [Framework for Action on page 23](#).



What Colleges Can Do

CHILD CARE ACCESS

On-Campus Child Care Centers

On-campus child care centers remain the gold standard when institutions can provide them. Santa Fe Community College’s Kids Campus serves 128 children in 10 classrooms, including four tuition-free, state-funded pre-K classrooms. The other classrooms also largely serve those receiving child care subsidies. The center holds accreditation from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), has a bilingual curriculum, and maintains low teacher-to-child ratios with highly qualified lead teachers and assistants in every classroom.

The impact of on-campus care is measurable: [research at Monroe Community College in New York](#) found that student parents who used the on-campus child care center were three times more likely to graduate with an associate degree or transfer to a bachelor’s degree-granting institution within three years compared to those who didn’t use the center.

Quality is essential. Multiple administrators interviewed for this paper emphasized that student parents need accredited, high-quality child care where they’re confident their children are safe, learning, and receiving quality care. Centers that serve as labs for early childhood education programs foster this quality while fulfilling an academic purpose.

The challenges are significant. On-campus centers face space constraints, staffing shortages, licensing requirements, and concerns about financial sustainability. Many operate with complicated priority systems and waitlists that limit access even for student parents. Despite the demonstrated impact, many colleges have

closed child care centers in recent years, citing these challenges.

Funding models vary. Some centers receive CCAMPIS (Child Care Access Means Parents in School) grants from the federal government. Many use sliding fee scales, foundation scholarships, or combinations of funding sources. Others benefit from state subsidies—New Mexico’s expanded child care subsidies to 400% of the federal poverty level have enabled colleges to operate child care centers without incurring losses. And others partner with entities such as [Head Start](#) to offer on-campus child care.

Alternative Models: Meeting Diverse Needs Recognizing that full-service child care centers aren’t feasible for all institutions—or don’t meet all student parent needs—innovative colleges have developed alternative models such as drop-in care, voucher programs, and community partnerships.

Drop-in Care: [Dallas College partners with the YMCA](#) to provide on-campus drop-in child care in four-hour increments, up to 12 hours per week, free of charge. The pilot started at the El Centro campus for students in health sciences programs with longer practicums and is expanding to Northlake and Richmond campuses. [Madison College has piloted drop-in care](#) and is planning to offer drop-in care routinely beginning with the Fall 2026 term, specifically for students who need child care for brief periods, like advising appointments, addressing the reality that many parenting students don’t need full-time care but can’t access services without short-term support.

Voucher Programs: [Lee College in Texas](#) provides weekly child care assistance going toward a licensed provider of each student’s

choice. This model acknowledges that families may have existing child care relationships or need care closer to home or work rather than campus.

Based on financial need, course load, and number of children, the college covers 25%-100% of child care costs.

Community Partnerships: [El Paso Community College works with the YWCA](#), which provides child care at two of the school's campuses. Northwest Vista College, part of the Alamo College district, partnered with the YMCA of Greater San Antonio to enable free on-campus child care during evening and weekend courses. These partnerships allow institutions to provide access without taking on the full operational burden of running child care centers.



CASE STUDY

El Paso Community College's Family College

When El Paso Community College surveyed students in spring 2021, they found that roughly 45% of their enrollment (excluding dual credit high school students) were parents. Many were single parents who wanted to continue their education but couldn't because of child care limitations.

The Family College Project addressed this directly. Parenting students register for evening courses or Saturday morning courses at the Valle Verde campus. Their children, ages 6-14, enroll in free, age-appropriate classes taught by the college's Children's College instructors.

Children's courses meet for 90 minutes over eight weeks and include reading, Spanish language, computer skills, gymnastics, math, and even Minecraft modding. The program serves multiple purposes: it removes child care as a barrier to enrollment, it provides enriching educational experiences for children, and it signals to student parents that they're welcome and that the institution recognizes their responsibilities. As President Serrata said, the program helps "create a college-going culture, which will have a generational impact for years to come."

El Paso Community College has Student Parent Resource Centers on all five campuses. The centers aren't child care, as parents remain with their children. Instead, they're spaces designed to accommodate families rather than requiring parents to find child care just to study or do homework on campus.

STUDENT-PARENT-FRIENDLY PHYSICAL SPACES

“Having spaces that acknowledge kids exist—makes it more welcoming,” Allred said.

Creating family-friendly physical spaces requires less financial investment than child care but displays institutional commitment and directly helps student parents feel welcome and included on campus.

Inclusive Spaces: The simplest changes send powerful messages. Lactation rooms or lactation pods provide nursing mothers with private, comfortable spaces to feed their babies. Family bathrooms with changing stations acknowledge that parents may need to bring children to campus. High chairs in the cafeteria, such as those at Madison College, signal that children are welcome during meals. Children’s corners in waiting areas, like Santa Fe’s Student Affairs office corner with toys and books, give children something to do while parents meet with advisors and financial aid. Pregnant and parenting student parking spaces reduce one barrier for parents managing children, car seats, and supplies.

Dedicated Spaces: Dedicated student-parent-friendly study rooms like the Family Study Room at Santa Fe Community College’s library offers a play space with tablets with educational content alongside desks and computers for adults or older children. The space allows parents to study while supervising their children.

All five of El Paso Community College’s Student Parent Resource Centers ([see case study, Page 8](#)) provide a well-equipped study space with computers, large-screen TVs for educational programming, children’s smart tables, baby changing stations, and age-appropriate book collections.

Accessible Spaces: Santa Fe Community College incorporates play spaces throughout the campus rather than isolating them in one location. Their tutoring center welcomes children and provides toys, puzzles, and books so parents can get academic help without securing child care. The Student Wellness Center offers counseling services and resource coordination in a family-friendly space with a children’s play area. The campus clothing closet, “The Exchange,” includes infant and toddler clothing and toys alongside adult clothing, and explicitly welcomes children to visit with their parents. Finally, they identified that 20% of their student parents are in health care degree programs and created a play space in the health sciences building, recognizing that these students face particular challenges getting child care for clinical hours and need support in the buildings where they spend the most time.

HOLISTIC SUPPORT: ADDRESSING BASIC NEEDS

Student parents don’t just need academic or child care support. They need wraparound services addressing the full spectrum of challenges they face, from food insecurity to mental health to making them aware of public benefits they are eligible to access.

Dr. Carlos Cruz, associate vice chancellor of student well-being and social support at Dallas College, describes working with parenting students using “a three-tiered approach” that looks at basic needs, financial literacy and

nutritional education, and academic support. Using a comprehensive lens recognizes that supporting student parents means supporting their families; addressing tuition, child care, academic advising, mental health, degree completion, and economic stability.

Inclusive Services: Institutions can ensure student parents can access existing support systems without additional barriers. Food pantries can include baby supplies, formula, and diapers, as done at both Santa Fe Community College and Madison College. Emergency aid programs can have simple, transparent application processes without excessive administrative red tape, making it easier for students to navigate. For example, Dallas College provides [emergency aid of up to \\$500](#) for critical family needs, such as minor car repairs; replacement of essential personal belongings or temporary housing needs due to fire, flood, theft, or natural disaster; as well as other emergency situations that impact a student’s ability to fully participate in their classes. The [Dallas College Family Care Program](#) provides funding for car seats and cribs, too. Financial aid offices can train staff to understand the specific needs and circumstances of student parents, including dependency questions, child care subsidies, and other benefits.

Community Partnerships: Community partnerships extend institutional capacity. El Paso Community College [partnered with United Way](#) of El Paso County to place social services navigators on each of its five campuses one day per week. The navigators meet directly with students, help them apply for benefits, and connect them to community services. As Rodriguez explains, it’s about “connecting the college with the community to help students succeed.”

Dallas College provides mental health counseling services, including 8-10 free counseling sessions, through its own department. They also partner



with Metrocare, a local mental health provider for access to long-term mental health care. Madison College partners with the YWCA to provide donated and discounted passes so students with children can access YWCA drop-in child care as well as fitness classes and wellness programs.

Basic Needs Integration: Dallas College’s Student Care Network offers an integrated team of student care coordinators (licensed professional counselors or licensed social workers), a Basic Needs and Community Connections department, Health Services and Promotion, and Counseling and Psychological Services. The coordinators work with all students, including student parents, to create comprehensive action plans for the semester and through to completion.

In practice, this means Dallas College has created an ecosystem of community partnerships to ensure their students can succeed. The Family Care Initiative served 226 parenting students (exceeding their goal of 100) with a 96% persistence rate in 2023.

The [Family Scholar House](#) model—a nonprofit providing residential and educational support for student parents—is a testament to what’s possible with comprehensive support: an 86% graduation rate with 99% of graduates moving on to stable housing.

FAMILY PROGRAMMING: BUILDING COMMUNITY

Family programming serves dual purposes: providing information that student parents need and building community to combat isolation.

Informational Programming: Information sessions on topics relevant to parenting students require minimal investment but address real needs. Sessions might cover financial literacy, navigating child care subsidy applications, understanding Title IX protections, or connecting to community resources. El Paso hosts open houses and events at their Student Parent Resource Centers to familiarize students with available services and connect them to opportunities. Santa Fe Community College offers a story time at the library in collaboration with the local children’s museum and parenting workshops that cover a variety of topics, including family financial wellness workshops. Mt. San Antonio College in California hosts workshops covering topics such as talking to teens and domestic violence resources, academic success strategies through ethical use of AI tools, and transfer pathways.

Recognition: Graduation recognition acknowledges student-parents’ achievements and the role their families played in their success. Madison College provides recognition pins, age-appropriate books for children, and coloring books for graduation ceremonies. Lee College allows student parents to walk the stage with their children to show that families graduate together. Some institutions offer special chords to graduates with children to wear during commencement ceremonies to recognize student parents.

Dedicated Community Building: Large-scale conferences can create significant opportunities for community building. Mt. San Antonio College’s Emerging Parent Institute brings 150



student parents together for a full day with keynote speakers, breakout sessions on topics like career planning and academic support, and a resource fair featuring campus and community partners. El Paso Community College hosted a two-day event at two campuses in February 2025 with plans to make it an annual event. These conferences create visibility, combat isolation, and show institutional commitment to their students with children.

“Students wanted a community of parents who are experiencing similar issues,” explains Sara Gamez, assistant director of Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS), Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education (CARE), and California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKS) at Mt. San Antonio College, all programs that work with low-income students with children.

If large scale conferences are not possible, offering brown bag or pizza lunches or dinners, or even just afternoon gatherings, where parenting students can connect with each other is a good way to build engagement and demonstrate institutional support.

NAVIGATION AND CASE MANAGEMENT

Student parents need to navigate two complex systems simultaneously: higher education (e.g., admissions, financial aid, registration, academic requirements) and parenting support (e.g., child care subsidies, food programs, housing assistance, health care). But institutions can help students navigate this two-fold need.

Centralized Information: Institutions can centralize information in one prominent location, such as California State Polytechnic University’s approach of creating a central hub on the Dean of Students website that provides both on- and off-campus support. Having a single point of contact who knows available resources and can direct parenting students appropriately makes a significant difference.

However, proactive outreach matters to ensure the impact of information. Rather than waiting for student parents to find information, institutions can reach out at key points: when students first apply, at registration, at midterms when withdrawal decisions are made, and before graduation, to ensure students have access to all available support for completing their degrees.

Navigation: Dedicated student-parent navigators or coordinators expand access to support by connecting student parents to resources, helping them navigate challenges before they become crises, and providing consistent support throughout their educational journey.

Santa Fe’s Student Parent Success Program offers one-on-one coaching and small group support. Participants must be enrolled in a certificate or degree program and have a child under age 18 or be expecting a child. The program is “very successful,” with a persistence rate of “over 80% fall to fall; regular retention is much lower,” according to college officials. The



collection of student parent data allows them to measure outcomes.

Case Management: Full case management with comprehensive support represents the highest level of service. [Dallas College’s](#) model includes success coaches, licensed counselors, and navigators working as an integrated team. Each student parent develops an individualized action plan addressing academic goals, family needs, and barriers to completion. Regular check-ins and progress monitoring encourage students to stay on track.

The challenge, acknowledged across institutions, is sustainability. Many of these positions are grant-funded. Santa Fe has a student parent success manager and a coach funded through grants, which makes it more difficult to sustain. This opens a conversation around the importance of identifying alternative funding opportunities that add to current funding streams and consequently, making it more sustainable long-term.

ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATIONS

Academic accommodations directly address how student parents experience the classroom and course scheduling, often requiring policy changes and faculty engagement rather than financial resources.

Course Scheduling and Registration: Priority registration has emerged as a critical tool for parenting students and has been mandated in some states, such as California. Student parents with limited child care options need to build their schedules around the availability of care. Without priority registration, they may be forced into schedules that don't align with child care or work schedules, making enrollment impossible. However, Mt. San Antonio College notes that while priority registration is available, "many don't know about it"—making awareness and communication key to its success.

Beyond priority registration, course scheduling that accommodates student parents expands access. Evening, weekend, hybrid, and online options allow student parents to take classes

when they have child care or after work. El Paso's Family College model goes further by providing children's programming during course times, making evening and weekend classes accessible to parents who otherwise couldn't attend.

Parenting Student Cohorts: Cohort-based models with intentional scheduling create community while simplifying logistics. Northwest Vista College in Texas offers cohort-based course scheduling where student parents progress together in a structured sequence. Courses are held adjacent to the YMCA child care site, making drop-off and pickup seamless. Children receive a free meal and homework tutoring while parents are in class.

Santa Fe relies on data collection to sustain funding and prove the value of its Student Parent Success Program, which provides 1:1 and small group coaching and support and additional opportunities for participating student parents to connect with peers. Data collection with a focus on student outcomes shows the program has a persistence rate of over 80% fall-to-fall. Without that data, the program could face an uncertain future.



TIP

Cohort scheduling builds community and simplifies logistics.

When student parents move through courses together in a cohort-based model a sense of community and strengthened peer support develops. In addition to parenting student cohorts, colleges can establish child care sites within close proximity of classes to offer time-saving conveniences student parents need to make college more accessible in their busy lives. *See more in our Framework for Action on page 23.*



CASE STUDY

Santa Fe Community College

Thirty percent of Santa Fe Community College's degree-seeking students are parents, and the college has made their success an institutional priority.

Kids Campus, their on-campus child care center, serves roughly 130 children from 2 months to 5 years old in 10 classrooms, including four tuition-free, state-funded pre-K classrooms (see "On Campus Child Care Centers," [Page 7](#)). The Student Parent Success Program provides one-on-one and small group coaching and support. Participants must be enrolled in a certificate or degree program and have a child under 18 or be expecting. Persistence is over 80% fall to fall; significantly higher than campus-wide rates. Some students receive stipends for participation.

Santa Fe pays Student Parent Alliance members \$15/hour for up to 60 hours per semester to attend monthly meetings, provide feedback, plan activities and events, and represent the program at campus and community events.

Family-friendly spaces are distributed throughout campus: a family study room in the library, play spaces in the tutoring center, a children's corner in the Student Affairs office, pregnant and parenting student parking spaces, a lactation room, and a play space in the health sciences building. The campus clothing closet includes infant and toddler clothing and toys. The Student Wellness Center has a children's play area.

Programming includes monthly library storytime, family financial wellness workshops, and family events throughout the year. The College Ready program helps parents who are not yet enrolled begin their college journey through a five-session class that explores majors and careers, completes applications, fills out financial aid forms, tours campus, and introduces resources.

The work extends beyond campus. Santa Fe helped launch the New Mexico Student Parent Alliance to help other institutions build capacity to support parenting students statewide. They created the first guide on student-parent-friendly spaces, sharing best practices for community colleges.

INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE AND LEADERSHIP

A culture that prioritizes parenting students doesn't happen accidentally—it requires leadership commitment, systematic approaches, and sustained effort to change how institutions operate.

Leadership Buy-In: Each of the leaders interviewed for this piece stressed the importance of leadership buy-in.

“Leadership buy-in is necessary for success. Being a president’s project opens the doors with campus deans and getting space for the Student Parent Resource Centers,” Rodriguez explains about El Paso’s success.

“The support of leadership is so important,” Sylvia Ramirez, executive vice president of finance and administration at Madison College, said, placing the same emphasis on leadership’s role.

Presidential and cabinet-level commitment is essential for several concrete reasons. Leaders control space allocation, critical when trying to create Student Parent Resource Centers or student-parent-friendly study areas on campuses where space is contested. They control budgets and can authorize critical needs requests that move programs from grant-funded pilots to permanent institutional investments. They can create cross-campus committees that bring together academic affairs, student services, facilities, and other departments that typically

operate independently. They can also develop partnerships with community organizations and secure buy-in from deans who control scheduling and faculty engagement.

Leadership actions that matter include direct engagement with student parents, strategic planning with measurable goals for student parent persistence and completion, specific budget allocation for initiatives rather than relying entirely on grants, creation of cross-campus committees focused on student parent success, and development of partnerships that extend institutional capacity.

Faculty Engagement: Institutions can engage faculty directly in supporting parenting students. Title IX protections for pregnant and parenting students are federal law, but not universally understood. Institutions should clearly communicate these protections and ensure faculty and staff know how to implement pregnancy-related accommodations. Santa Fe emphasizes Title IX services on its student parent website and trains staff on these protections.

However, faculty training can go beyond basic Title IX awareness to help instructors understand the unique challenges parenting students face and how to create inclusive classrooms. This might include training on flexible attendance and assignment policies that acknowledge family emergencies and guidance on when having children in classrooms is appropriate. Faculty can implement several practices, such as syllabi statements that acknowledge and encourage student parents to communicate family-related challenges that arise.

Madison College’s approach gives faculty choice but provides institutional guidance about whether children can attend class, but the college aims to offer drop-in child care and family-friendly spaces, so parents have options. This balances faculty autonomy with institutional work to support student parents.

Institutionalization and Sustainability

Many innovative programs exist in precarious states, relying on grant funding that will eventually end. The challenge every institution faces is moving from pilot projects to permanent institutional commitments.

Piloting with grant funds and expanding systematically are proven approaches. El Paso Community College's trajectory illustrates how programs can move from soft money to permanent funding. They started with COVID Higher Education Emergency Relief Funds, which provided one year of part-time staff for Student Parent Resource Centers. Before that funding ended, they submitted a critical needs request to institutionalize those part-time positions. Then they requested full-time staff positions plus a manager to oversee the whole project. Those requests were approved, and the program now sits within the Director of Student Services' portfolio alongside other established programs, such as TRIO Student Support Services, the Retention Action Program, and Academic Tutoring Centers.

Additionally, starting small and building incrementally is more sustainable than launching comprehensive programs all at once. Madison College began by identifying student parents as a population that had not been considered, then participated in Generation Hope's [FamilyU technical assistance program](#), then created a navigator position, built partnerships, and began offering services like family study spaces and baby basic needs, and expanded the existing child care facility and, as of January 2026, opened a new child care facility at their second largest campus. This was not sequential, as they noticed the gap, became involved in FamilyU, and upon their engagement with FamilyU they began to work on initiatives at a slower pace.

Each step built on previous success and generated the institutional support for the next level of investment.

The FamilyU Cohort is a comprehensive, customized, evidence-based, two-year capacity-building experience run by Generation Hope designed to build and refine institutional competencies to improve student-parent success. In partnership with institutional staff and student parents, colleges and universities participate in peer learning convenings and campus-focused independent coaching sessions.



DATA COLLECTION: YOU CAN'T SERVE WHO YOU CAN'T SEE

Without data, student parents are invisible to the system. Institutions may assume they're a small population when they actually represent a larger percentage of students. They can't identify student parent enrollment trends, the most acute barriers they face, or whether interventions are actually improving outcomes. Madison College integrates student parent data into its Student Information System and uses it to disaggregate outcomes and understand needs.

Several approaches to effective and impactful data collection emerged from the interviews:

Application questions: El Paso Community College added a question to its Apply Texas application (the state's centralized online application system) in March 2024 for fall 2025 enrollment: "Are you a student parent?" with follow-up questions about the number and ages of children. This captures everyone from the start of their college journey, allowing the institution to send resources immediately and reach out proactively.

Registration questions each term: Monroe Community College pioneered asking parenting questions at every term of registration, and El Paso followed suit. This captures students throughout their enrollment and updates information as family circumstances change.

Student surveys: Several institutions conducted classroom or online surveys to identify student parents. El Paso discovered many more students than they expected are student parents through this process.

Integration into student information systems: Making parenting status a standard



demographic field allows institutions to track persistence, completion, GPA, and other outcomes for parenting students compared to non-parenting students. This data proves whether interventions work.

What to track matters as much as whether you collect data. Institutions should know who their student parents are (demographics, program enrollment, number and ages of children), whether they're utilizing services (child care, resource centers, coaching, financial aid advising), whether they're persisting (term to term, year to year), whether they're completing (certificates, degrees, transfer), and what barriers they report facing.

The only reason Santa Fe knows that their Student Parent Success Program (see case study, [Page 14](#)) is because they collect student parent data and look at outcomes.

STUDENT BELONGING AND INVOLVEMENT

Student Parent Engagement and Co-Creation:

The most successful programs consistently and thoughtfully engage the people they serve. Keeping the student parent voice central to a program's design matters for several reasons. They know what they actually need versus what institutions assume they need and co-creation increases relevance and buy-in. And it develops leadership skills for the students, creating peer leaders who can support others.

Student Parent Advisory Councils: Student parent alliances or advisory councils give structured roles to student parents in program governance, and including student parents on task forces and committees ensures their perspective in institutional decision-making. Santa Fe pays alliance members \$15/hour for up to 60 hours per semester to attend monthly meetings, provide feedback, plan activities and events, and represent the program at campus and community events.

Surveys: Regular surveys and focus groups allow institutions to assess needs and evaluate programs. Multiple colleges conduct these assessments annually or each semester, using feedback to adjust services and identify emerging needs. In addition to learning they had more student parents than they thought, student responses in their survey helped El Paso Community College shape the design of their Student Parent Resource Centers.

Additional Visibility and Belonging Strategies

Creating visibility and belonging requires intentional strategies across marketing, representation, and community building.

Inclusive Marketing: Institutions should feature student parents in marketing materials and social media, showing prospective and current students who are parents are welcome. Santa Fe conducts photoshoots for program and college marketing to highlight real students and to create visibility. El Paso Community College created posters around campus featuring student parents and even produced a commercial. At commencement, they feature student-parent graduates with their children and families, sending a clear message that the institution sees and celebrates their success.

Creating Community: Affinity groups and clubs allow student parents to connect with each other, combating isolation. Madison has a Student Parent Club. Mt. San Antonio College hosts parent dinners in spring and fall, where they share a range of information with student parents. For instance, they provide students information about tutoring and academic support services at the college, alongside community building.

Peer-to-peer mentoring and tutoring programs and opportunities to connect with each other go a long way in building community and helping remind student parents they are not alone; that others are also navigating a similar path.

Representation in Leadership: Including student parents on panels at conferences, having them present to institutional leadership, and featuring them at external events gives parenting students voice while demonstrating their expertise. When the Assistant Secretary of Education visited Santa Fe Community College, they included a student parent on a panel about Career and Technical Education—treating student parents as authorities on their own experiences rather than passive recipients of services.



CASE STUDY

Madison College

Madison College in Wisconsin discovered in 2021, via a representative survey, that approximately 42% of its students are parents of minor children and 50% have some sort of caregiving responsibility. That data became the foundation for systematic, comprehensive support designed with student parents at the heart.

The college participated in Generation Hope's FamilyU Cohort for two years—significant because it required buy-in from the college president. Administrators emphasize that presidential support made everything else possible: “We didn't have to fight to get these services. The leadership heard directly from student parents. We have the president's support. The president meets with student parents.”

Madison College received a state COVID grant (through Wisconsin's Workforce Innovation Grant program) to address workforce participation systematically. They provided tuition scholarships and covered mandatory fees for nine-credit early childhood education credentials, including classes offered bilingually, while expanding support services.

The Early Learning Campus represents the most visible investment. Madison purchased the former fire station site from the City of Madison for \$1. With \$10 million in funding from local donors, grant funding, and donations from faculty, staff, and students, they built a facility that opened in January 2026. The facility will serve over 80 children age 6 weeks to 5 years old when fully staffed. Approximately 80% of slots go to students. The center will also function as a practicum site for early childhood education students.

While building that facility, Madison College created immediate supports: a student parent resource navigator connected to the child care center who supports parenting students across the district, a webpage with family resources, student-parent-friendly study spaces on multiple campuses, Baby Basic Needs pop-ups providing diapers and wipes at different campuses, a Student Parent Club, Student Parent Month recognition in September, and a monthly newsletter.

They developed “Children on Campus” policies giving faculty guidance while maintaining flexibility. They educated faculty about Title IX protections. They created baskets filled with age-appropriate toys students can use during class if needed, added high chairs to the cafeteria, and created lactation spaces.

While on-campus child care remains a concern, Madison College recognized many student parents don't need full-time care—they need part-time care for a single course, advising appointments or drop-in care for unexpected situations. They're piloting drop-in care while also offering part-time child care options.



CASE STUDY (continued)

Madison College

Drop-in care financing is the most challenging model. Madison’s pilot program aims to provide more certainty on strategies to implement a permanent drop-in service, including fee rates and structure, staffing, and key times drop-in care is most needed by parenting students.

They partnered with local YWCA to provide donated and discounted passes so students can access YWCA drop-in care, workouts, and classes. They partnered with their child care resource and referral agency so students can access those services to find care that meets their needs.

One key to Madison College’s success: Including a student parent on every team that addresses student parent work. They’ve conducted surveys and focus groups to understand challenges and have a mix of cabinet-level leaders and managers, with senior representation in student affairs ensuring the college is “well represented.”

“Student parents have shared with us that at times they feel judged for their parenting status,” Jessica Cioci, dean in the School of Human and Protective Services, said: “Some state that there can be a degree of shame and isolation for being a student parent—particularly those who had a child in high school or early in college.”

Madison’s institutional culture work aims to significantly reduce that shame.

Madison College won the 2024 Strategic Data Excellence Award from Harvard’s Center for Education Policy Research for their data-informed approach to supporting student parents. They integrated student parent status into their Student Information System and continuously disaggregated outcomes to understand what’s working and where gaps remain.



TIP

When it comes to data collection, the type of data collected matters as much as data gathering.

Institutions should know the demographic characteristics of its undergraduates with dependent children, enrollment patterns, number and ages of children, services utilized, persistence rates from term-to-term and year-to-year, whether they complete their programs, and the barriers they face. *See more in our Framework for Action on page 23.*



Conclusion: Essential Practices and the Path Forward

The question facing colleges isn't whether student parents can succeed but whether institutions will work to remove the barriers that prevent their success despite their hard work.

The community colleges profiled in this toolkit prove that comprehensive support is possible and effective. Santa Fe Community College's Student Parent Success Program participants persist at 80% fall to fall, compared to much lower campus-wide rates. Dallas College's Family Care Initiative served 226 student parents with 96% persistence. Monroe Community College research showed student parents using on-campus child care were three times more likely to graduate or transfer within three years.

These outcomes don't happen accidentally. They require leadership commitment, systematic approaches, appropriate investment, and sustained effort to change institutional culture. But they're happening at colleges with different resources, in different states, serving different student populations. The essential lessons transcend context and whether big or small, individual institutional efforts to address barriers parent students face can transform local impact into national change.

ESSENTIAL TAKEAWAYS

1. Start with data. You can't serve who you can't see. Add a question to your application asking if students are parents and, if so, the number and ages of their children. Ask again at registration each term. Integrate this information into your student information

system so you can track outcomes. Without data, student parents remain invisible and institutions can't identify what works.

2. Listen to student parents. Lean into what parenting students tell you. Conduct surveys and focus groups. Create advisory councils. Include student parents on committees.

3. Leadership commitment is non-negotiable. Every successful program interviewed for this resource had strong presidential and cabinet-level support. Grassroots efforts without top-level support tend to stall. Presidents control space allocation, budget decisions, cross-campus coordination, and partnership development. When supporting student parents becomes a presidential priority with measurable goals and accountability, culture changes.

4. Think universal design. Solutions designed for student parents, flexible scheduling, holistic case management, basic needs support, simplified navigation, benefit adult learners, military-connected learners, working learners, first-generation students, and anyone with competing responsibilities. You're not building for a niche population; you're building for the students you actually serve.

5. Progress over perfection. Institutions start from different places with different resources. Start where you are, with what you have, meeting students where they are. Demonstrate outcomes. Build support. Expand systematically. The goal is meaningful progress, not immediate perfection.

MOVING FORWARD

The colleges profiled in this report prove that community colleges can intentionally and systematically support student parents. They've shown that with leadership commitment, student voice, cross-campus collaboration, and appropriate investment, institutions create environments where student parents don't just survive, they thrive.

This toolkit is the second in a series from Today's Students Coalition examining how to serve America's student parents better. The [first paper](#), "Supporting America's Student Parents," made the case for state policy action. Future resources in the series will examine specific topics in greater depth, including child care access, financial aid, and state policy models.





This framework helps institutions identify starting points and aspirational goals across support tiers. Institutions at any level can improve outcomes. The essential practices require more commitment than money. Enhanced practices are moderate investments, but often generate strong returns in persistence and completion. Exemplary practices are the strongest commitment and demonstrate what's possible when institutions truly prioritize student parents.

Essential Practices (Nominal/No Cost):



- Add student parent question to application and registration
- Create centralized student parent information on website
- Ensure food pantries include baby supplies and formula
- Designate lactation rooms and family bathrooms
- Create children's corners in waiting areas
- Implement syllabi statements supporting student parents
- Provide priority registration where authorized
- Train faculty and staff on Title IX protections
- Form cross-campus team to coordinate support

Enhanced Practices (Stronger Investment):



- Hire dedicated student parent navigator or coordinator
- Create family-friendly study spaces with materials for children
- Establish Student Parent Resource Centers
- Develop community partnerships for wraparound support
- Offer regular programming and events for student parents
- Create student parent affinity groups or clubs
- Provide one-on-one coaching or case management
- Feature student parents in marketing and communications
- Track and publish student parent outcomes
- Integrate student parent status into student information systems

Exemplary Practices (Strongest Investment):



- Provide on-campus child care with priority for student parents
- Offer integrated case management with licensed counselors/social workers
- Distribute family-friendly spaces throughout campus
- Provide drop-in and evening/weekend child care options
- Develop cohort-based programming (Family College models)
- Create paid student parent advisory councils
- Bring mobile services to campus (banking, health care, social services)
- Employ dedicated staff teams (manager, coaches, navigators)
- Build specialized student parent housing
- Develop comprehensive two-generation programming