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The Hope Center
for Student Basic Needs

PARENTING STUDENTS AT Community Colleges

Their Challenges, Resilience, and
Strategies to Support Them

In the United States, [18% of undergraduate students overall and 22% of students at community and technical colleges](#) take care of a dependent child while going to school. Among the nearly [1.6 million](#) parenting students enrolled at community and technical colleges in the U.S., about half have at least one child [under the age of six](#).

Balancing competing demands of raising children and attending school often requires **extraordinary effort and skill** from parenting students. Higher education was not designed to meet their specific and competing needs. Indeed, among the more than 12,000 parenting students who participated in [The Hope Center's 2023-2024 Student Basic Needs Survey](#), 74% indicated that they experienced basic needs insecurity related to food and/or housing (compared to 55% of non-parenting students), and 45% of parenting students who had previously stopped out of college and subsequently re-enrolled indicated that one of their reasons for leaving was **child care and/or other caregiving responsibilities**. However, when parenting students are properly supported and can achieve a credential, they pass on many [benefits to their children](#), including generational wealth and improved educational, health, and behavioral outcomes.



Higher levels of educational achievement among parenting students benefit society as well, by **reducing poverty, improving economic resilience, and increasing civic engagement**. According to the [Institute for Women's Policy Research \(IWPR\)](#), single mothers with a high school diploma are 1.8 times more likely to live in poverty than single mothers with an associate degree, and 3 times more likely than those with bachelor's degrees. It is estimated that for each \$1 invested in child care, case management, and financial aid to support single mothers in college, the U.S. receives approximately **\$5 in return** through higher tax revenues and decreased expenditures on public benefits.

Parenting students demonstrate incredible [resourcefulness and resilience](#) as they pursue their educational goals. They are more [academically engaged](#), have [higher GPAs](#), and are more likely to [seek available supports](#) than their non-parenting peers. This is despite having [fewer financial resources](#) and [less time](#) to devote solely to their educational pursuits.



Unfortunately, parenting students also face a [range of significant obstacles](#) during their educational journeys, including [negative attitudes](#) from instructors and staff, [lack of family-friendly facilities](#), difficulties finding safe and affordable [childcare options](#) that [fit their schedule](#), and other challenges inherent in [juggling their multiple roles](#) as students, employees, parents, etc. Similarly, the financial strain experienced by many parenting students is associated with higher rates of [basic needs insecurity](#) related to [food](#) and [housing](#) and in one study of single parents, [suicide attempts](#).

Community colleges play a vital role in helping parenting students to achieve their academic goals, because they serve a [higher proportion of parenting students](#) than four-year institutions. However, the

[chronic underfunding](#) of these institutions means that most lack sufficient infrastructure, facilities, and staffing to properly support parenting students and meet their unique needs and situations—from on-campus and drop-in childcare options and family-friendly spaces on campus to flexible

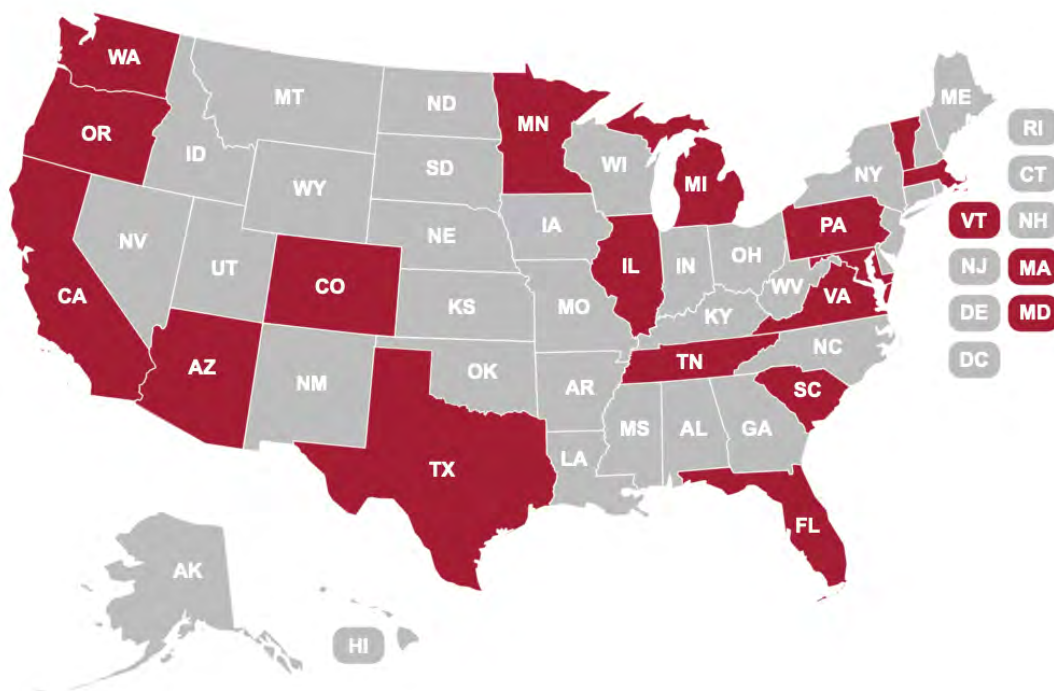
course scheduling and attendance policies designed around childcare availability.

Because of this, **community college parenting students** hold [higher amounts of student debt](#) while also [completing their education at lower rates](#) than their non-parenting peers.

Reversing these trends will require institutions, states, and the federal government to dedicate increased attention—and investment—to aligning resources, policies, and practices with the complex lives and needs of parenting students. Doing so would **improve educational and economic outcomes** not only for the [over three million undergraduate parenting students](#) in the U.S., but also for [their children and their communities](#).

The Current Study

This report shares survey findings from **90 community colleges across 17 states** that participated in the [INTuitN S-STEM Research Hub](#) or [Hope Impact Partnerships](#) (HIP) and fielded [The Hope Center Student Basic Needs Survey](#) between Spring 2023 and Spring 2025.



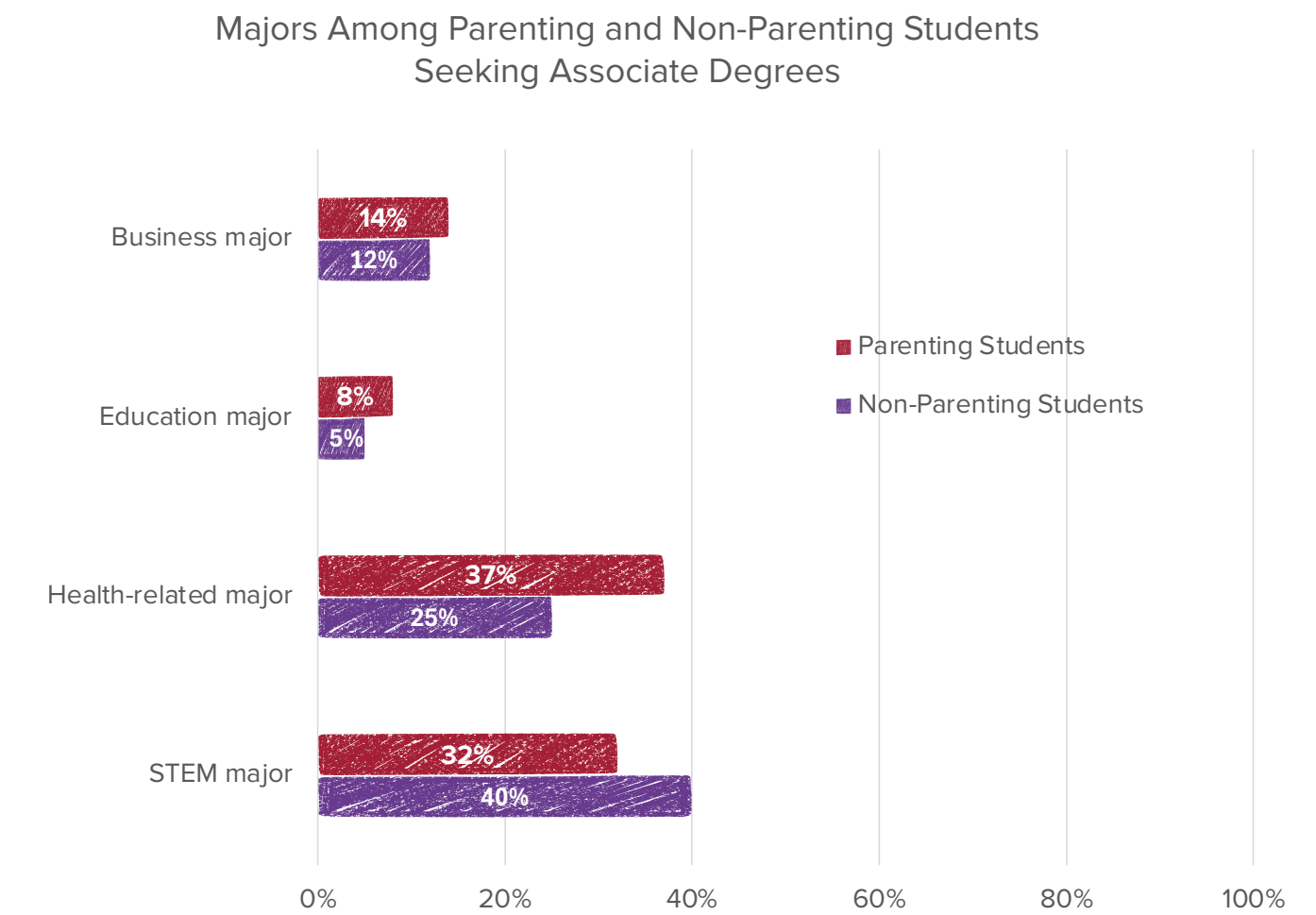
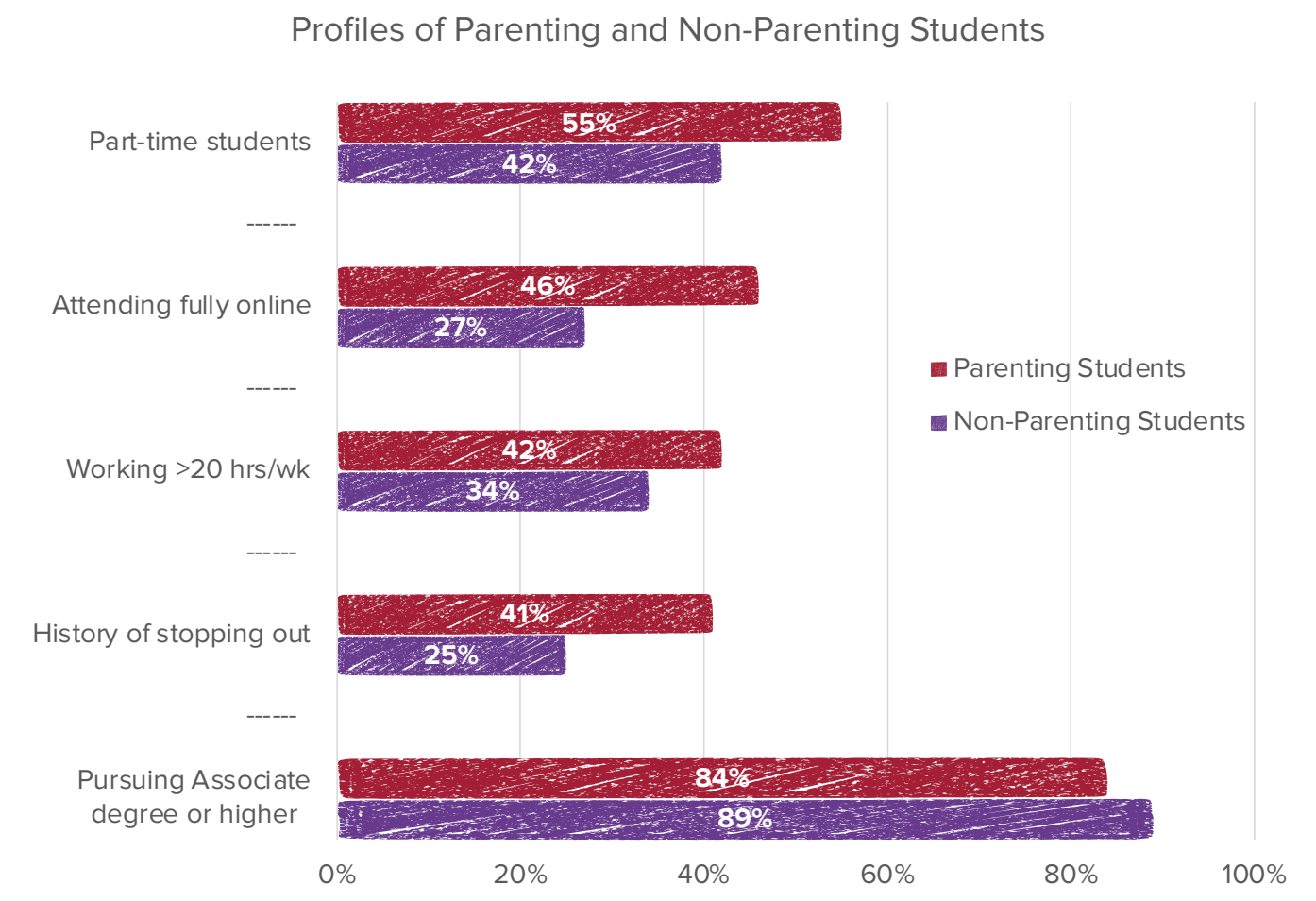
Profile of Parenting Students at Community Colleges

Of the 53,004 survey participants who reported their parenting status, **14,474 (27%) self-identified as parenting students** (i.e., the parent, primary caregiver, or legal or informal guardian of at least one child).

Consistent with [previous research](#), compared to non-parenting students, parenting students were more likely to be enrolled **part-time**, attending class in fully **online**, and **working at least 20 hours per week**.

In terms of the types of credentials students were pursuing, parenting students were more likely to be pursuing a credential **below associate-degree level** (i.e., high school equivalency or certificate) and less likely to be pursuing degrees at associate-degree level or higher.

Figure 1: Parenting students are a unique population with different characteristics and needs.



Among those pursuing associate degrees, parenting students were more likely to be in business, education, and healthcare majors, and **less likely to be in STEM¹ majors** (see Figure 1). This is consistent with [national statistics on parenting students' majors](#), and is perhaps unsurprising given the demanding, inflexible schedule of STEM courses (especially laboratory courses).

Challenges Experienced by Parenting Students at Community Colleges

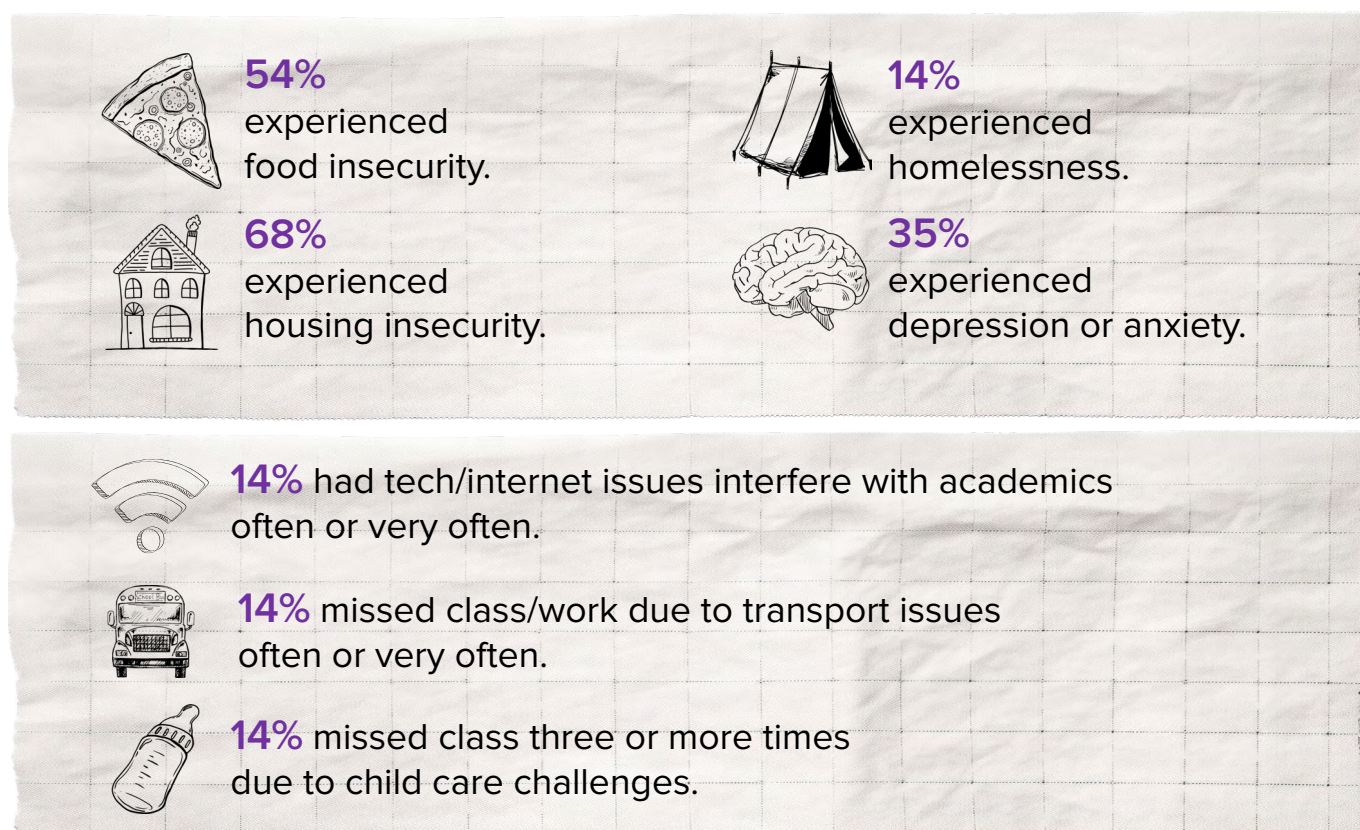
Over half of parenting students who enter higher education exit [without a credential](#). This is due, in part, to the reality that parenting students experience a broad swath of **basic needs challenges** that hinder their ability to remain enrolled and successfully pursue their academic goals.

In the current study, experiences of basic needs insecurity were very common among parenting students (see Figure 2). Parenting students were much more likely than their non-parenting peers to experience **food insecurity** (54% vs. 37%) and **housing insecurity** (68% vs. 43%). Their rates of homelessness (14% for both parenting and non-parenting students), internet/technology challenges (14% vs. 13%), and transportation challenges (10% vs. 12%) were similar to non-parenting students.

“As a single mother of two, the struggle is real but there’s a light at the end of the tunnel. And with the right assistance, you can make it through.”

- SINGLE MOTHER FROM TEXAS

Figure 2: Basic needs insecurities are common among parenting students.



Mental health challenges were also very common among parenting students, with over one in three (35%) experiencing **clinically significant symptoms of anxiety or depression**. Although this rate is somewhat lower than non-parenting students (45%), it is much higher than the general adult population in the U.S.² The added workloads and stress that parenting students face undoubtedly contribute to these higher rates of mental health challenges.

Finding affordable, convenient, and high-quality **child care** ranks among the most significant barriers that parenting students face to remaining engaged and enrolled in college. In the current study, **17% of parenting students reported that they missed class three or more times in the previous term due to lack of child care**, and 86% of parenting students rated child care as only somewhat or not at all affordable. Among students who had previously stopped out of college, 43% reported that childcare or caregiving responsibilities were a factor in their decision to leave school, and 34% reported that not having enough money for living expenses was a factor.

Despite the significant demand for affordable and flexible childcare options, the number of campuses with on-campus child care has actually been **steadily declining** over the last 20 years—meaning more students are facing these challenges every year.

Resourcefulness and Resilience Among Parenting Students at Community Colleges

As important as it is to acknowledge the challenges experienced by parenting students, it is also important to acknowledge the **skills, resilience, and resourcefulness** these students demonstrate. As the quote above states, it takes time management, as well as budgeting, prioritization, and many other skills to successfully balance school, work, and parenting.

Resourcefulness among parenting students means **self-advocating** and making the most out of every resource available to you. Our data suggest that parenting students actively seek out support. To account for likely eligibility, we examined use of campus basic needs supports and public benefits among students who reported experiencing at least one form of basic needs insecurity. Parenting students experiencing basic needs insecurity were **more likely to utilize both campus**

resources and public benefits than non-parenting students experiencing basic needs insecurity. Although there is still a lot of room to improve access and uptake of resources, 56% of parenting students experiencing basic needs insecurity utilized at least one campus-based basic needs resource, and 74% utilized at least one public benefit.³ Furthermore, **48% of parenting students experiencing basic needs insecurity used both campus supports and public benefits**, compared to only 25% of non-parenting students experiencing basic needs insecurity (see Figure 3).



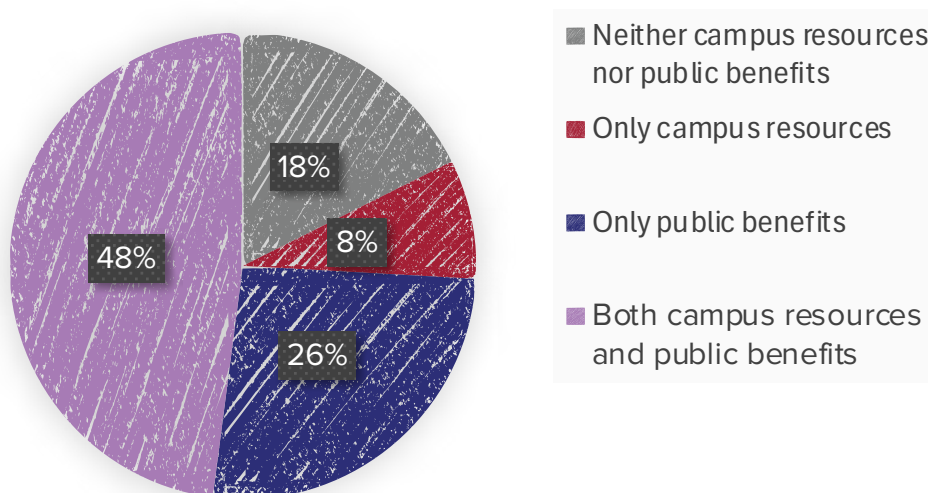
43% of parents who stopped out reported that **childcare or caregiving responsibilities** were a factor in their decision.

“Being a mom in college while working part-time and managing a low income is tough, but it shows great strength. Balancing classes, work, and parenting requires good time management and support from friends or family. Push through every time and if I can do it, you can too!”

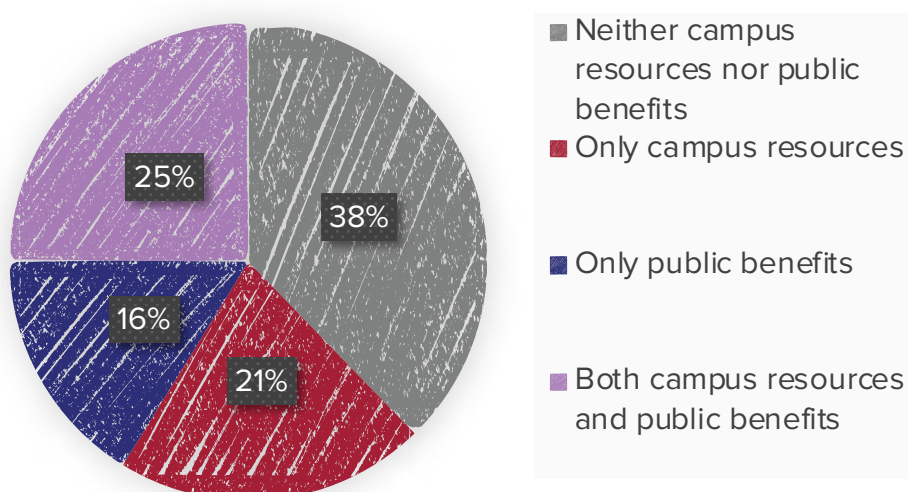
- STUDENT FROM MINNESOTA

Figure 2: Among those experiencing basic needs insecurity, parenting students are more likely than their non-parenting peers to utilize available campus and public resources.

Use of Campus Supports & Public Benefits Among Parenting Students Experiencing Basic Needs Insecurity



Use of Campus Supports & Public Benefits Among Non-Parenting Students Experiencing Basic Needs Insecurity



Even excluding benefits that parenting students qualify for specifically because they have children (e.g., WIC, TANF), parenting students experiencing basic needs insecurity were more likely to take advantage of campus supports, including emergency grants (14% vs. 10%), help applying for public benefits (35% vs. 13%), and campus housing supports (5% vs. 2%). They were also more likely to utilize public benefits programs such as SNAP (39% vs. 15%), LIHEAP or utility assistance (14% vs. 4%), and public housing assistance (9% vs. 3%). **Despite being more likely to utilize supports than non-parenting students, the rates of utilization are quite low considering nearly all parenting students experiencing basic needs insecurity would be eligible for both public benefits and campus supports.** This suggests that parenting students could **greatly benefit from increased outreach** to inform them of the supports available to them.

Because most parenting students balance classes with employment (not to mention time needed for homework), traditional child care hours are insufficient to meet most parenting students' needs. When it comes to child care, parenting students are again resourceful. Over one-third of them (37%) used **multiple sources of child care**, and 59% relied on family and friends for child care at least some of the time. In open-ended survey questions, many parenting students spoke of taking **online courses** so that they can be home with their children, either because they couldn't afford child care or because it wasn't available at the times they needed it. Others spoke of **missing class** when school-age children had days off. In fact, as noted above, 17% of parenting students reported they had missed three or more days of class the previous term due to issues with childcare arrangements.

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“It can be hard, especially being a father of two who stays home with the children so my wife can work. We only have the one income because we spent more in child care for one child than I made a month part time.”

- STUDENT FROM MINNESOTA

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Parenting students have higher grades, are more academically engaged, and are more confident than their non-parenting peers.

Despite the challenges, **parenting students are resilient**. Parenting students in the current study were more confident than their non-parenting peers that they belong in college and that they will succeed academically. Research suggests they earn **higher grades** in college and are **more academically engaged** than their non-parenting peers. For example, though they may miss class due to childcare arrangements, they are less likely than non-parenting students to *skip* class, and they are more likely to come to class prepared. This is further evidence that the **lower degree completion rates** among parenting students result from a

lack of resources and supports, not a lack of effort or ambition. If institutions provided sufficient supports for parenting students, it could result in much higher graduation rates.

Promising Policies and Practices for Supporting Parenting Students

Fully supporting parenting students will require greater investment, alignment, and support from institutions, states, and the federal government to create, and sustain, campus and classroom environments capable of **serving parenting students' unique needs and making the most of their unique strengths**.

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“It can be hard to be a mom of three small children and decide to go back to school, but it's possible to rock it. I was so afraid that I would be overwhelmed but if you can find a school that has understanding teachers and a good amount of online classes, you can do it!”

- STUDENT FROM CALIFORNIA

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Know Your Parenting Students

As a first step to supporting parenting students, campuses figure out how to identify this sometimes “invisible” population by **collecting data** on which students are parenting, how old their children are, and what types of child care they might need.

The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) allows colleges to see which federal financial aid applicants are “independents with dependents”—meaning they provide at least half the support to a child or adult dependent (though adult dependents are rare). Other opportunities to collect or expand upon the data include admissions applications, course registration, or intake forms for campus services and advising. These avenues would allow greater insight into the ages of the parenting students’ children, which could determine whether there is a greater need for infant, toddler, youth, or drop-in care.

Once colleges maintain and integrate parenting student data into students’ records, they will have a centralized understanding of the number of parenting students on campus and their specific needs—allowing them to then shape and advocate for additional resources and support. For example, in the financial aid context, all parenting students should receive a “dependent care allowance” that could unlock additional federal, state, and private resources to help them afford college, stay enrolled, and complete a degree or credential.

Take a 2Gen Approach

Parenting students have unique needs that cannot be fully met without taking into account the needs of their children, and unique educational strengths that likewise cannot be fully realized if they lack adequate support for their children. The **Two-Generation, or 2Gen, approach** seeks to integrate programs, services, and resources designed for parents and their children into a mutually reinforcing network of supports for the whole family. [Ascend at the Aspen Institute](#) has a [resource library](#) with a wealth of case studies, guides, research, and more resources dedicated to sharing lessons learned and helping even more institutions successfully adopt a 2Gen approach.

One example is the [Scholar House model](#) that originated in Kentucky, which provides housing, child care, and wraparound services (e.g., counseling, workshops, tutoring) for parenting students. Another robust example is the [Ruth Matthews Bourger Women with Children Program](#) at Misericordia University (PA). This program recognizes the importance of **holistic wraparound supports** and community-building for parenting students. It combines housing, financial assistance, and child care with a variety of supports for parents (e.g., tutoring, goal setting, and counseling) and their children (e.g., summer camp, a children’s garden, and swimming lessons).

An obvious first step toward a 2Gen is **connecting parenting students with child care and other resources**. Having childcare options on campus serves more than just parenting students and their children. Many **campus childcare centers also serve a third “generation”**—the next generation of early childhood educators. Students who are enrolled in Early Childhood Education (ECE) or other child and family development programs can get essential, real-world experience working in the childcare center. As such, the campus childcare center can help ECE students complete practicum requirements and lab hours, including observation and field work, while also providing needed childcare services for parenting students. Some examples of this model include [Mott Community College](#) (MI), [Salt Lake Community College](#) (UT), and [St. Louis Community College](#) (MO).

The Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) and the National Head Start Association are working together to increase the number of [Head Start programs co-located on community college campuses](#).

The **Kids on Campus** partnership benefits community colleges by providing an experienced, on-site childcare provider as well as training and job/internship experiences for students seeking careers in early childhood education or related fields. Head Start programs benefit from free or heavily subsidized rent for space for classrooms on campus.

Although on-site child care is ideal, campuses that do not have on-site child care can provide **referrals** to community providers, help parenting students explore **public benefits** and resources to help pay for child care, and even offer **financial assistance** from the college to help offset costs. [Saint Paul College](#) (MN) curates a **library of campus and public resources** for parenting students. This is a great way for schools to show their commitment to parenting student success and connect them to needed supports. Consider designating a **student parent liaison** to help students identify, access, and navigate resources.

Establish a Comprehensive Basic Needs Support Ecosystem

Child care and parenting supports are basic needs for parenting students. Due to the high levels of basic needs insecurities among parenting students, any campus efforts to address basic needs insecurity also have the potential to benefit many parenting students. Some [evidence](#) suggests that schools that provide more basic needs supports also have more parenting students persist. [Dallas College's Student Care Network](#) (TX) takes a **comprehensive approach** to basic needs programs and services that also includes a [Family Care Program](#) to provide parenting supplies and family support classes and a range of childcare options (on-campus centers, a drop-in care partnership with the YMCA, and childcare subsidies).

In addition, it is important to consider whether your general basic needs supports are accessible for student parents. Does your housing support include options for family housing? Is your basic needs office or hub welcoming of students who might have their kids along with them? Does your pantry have options that will work well for family meals? A wonderful example of this is at [Springfield Technical Community College](#) (MA). They provide fast and easy meal prep crockpot meal kits so students can have meals ready after class and work. They have crockpots and recipe cards that are aligned with available food pantry options. They also have an option for students to pick up their groceries at food lockers, providing more flexibility for students so that the hours and location of the pantry do not create barriers to access.

Create Family-Friendly Spaces and Policies

Make it clear to parenting students that they and their families are welcome and valued on your campus. Relatively small investments can be made to set up family-friendly study spaces in the library, add kid-friendly seating in reception areas of student support and administrative offices, designate lactation rooms, and add changing tables in restrooms. Provide professional development for faculty and staff on the supports available for parenting students and guidance on family-friendly course policies. Clarity regarding when children can accompany parents to class, how to make attendance policies flexible for parenting students, and [Title IX accommodations for pregnant students](#) can all help faculty to establish a family-friendly culture. Priority registration can ensure parenting students can take classes when child care is available, and priority parking can improve access to campus.

STATE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

State policymakers have a significant role to play in funding essential needs like child care and financial supports for students and connecting students with public benefits that may help meet rising costs.

For example, New Mexico [recently announced](#) that they would begin offering **universal, no-cost child care** beginning November 1st, 2025.

Paid for by [growing state revenues](#), this historic investment will remove income eligibility requirements from the state's childcare assistance program, helping to ensure that every family in the state can afford the child care services they need. Through this investment, the state is also hoping to expand the number of childcare providers within the state to address existing gaps in childcare accessibility and availability.

The [Minnesota Student Parent Support Initiative](#) (SPSI) administers a competitive grant program in partnership with the Minnesota Department of Health. Postsecondary institutions, professional organizations, and community-based organizations are awarded **funds to develop and implement programs and services catered to the unique needs of parenting students**.

Even when parenting student supports exist on campus, many schools struggle to do outreach to this group because their school does not have available data on which students have dependents. Some states (California, Illinois, Michigan, Oregon, Texas; Yates, 2024) have passed legislation **requiring that parenting status be reported**, and [institutional data policies](#) can also be enacted to improve campuses' understanding of their parenting student population and needs.

States can also improve students' understanding of the true cost of college and unlock additional financial aid or benefits for students by **mandating that institutions collect data on parenting students**. As of the release of this report, [five states](#) have passed legislation to improve data collection on parenting students: California, Oregon, Illinois, Michigan, and Texas. The California law requires colleges to collect information on parenting status, provide parenting students with priority registration (given their need to set their schedules more flexibly, and alongside groups like military-connected students and students with disabilities), and to factor in childcare costs to the "cost of attendance" estimates for all known parenting students.

Establishing **robust, statewide emergency aid programs** can also help parenting students address unexpected needs so that they can remain on track with their education. Effective programs utilize permanent state funding and distribute amounts to institutions based on total enrollment of underserved and low-income students. Minnesota's [Emergency Assistance for Postsecondary Students](#) and Washington's [Student Emergency Assistance Grant](#) programs offer models of statewide emergency aid programs.

Finally, states can leverage existing data systems and outreach to **connect students with benefits** for which they are eligible. Currently, parenting students are likely eligible for SNAP if they meet income and other criteria, through one of several parenting student exemptions, receiving TANF assistance, or by working 20 hours per week, as many students do. State SNAP agencies, for example, should work with institutions of higher education to identify and connect potentially eligible students with SNAP benefits, particularly those who likely meet SNAP's income and other eligibility requirements and report caring for a dependent child.

FEDERAL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The federal **Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS)** program is the only program dedicated to providing campus child care for low-income parenting students either on campus or through a community partner. Despite its success in supporting parenting students who otherwise may not be able to attend class or complete their schoolwork, the program remains underfunded: [only 1%](#) of potentially eligible students are served by the program, and an overview of [CCAMPIS recipients](#) also reveals an underrepresentation of rural-serving institutions. Given that the number of schools offering on-campus child care [declining](#), federal policymakers should dramatically expand funding for CCAMPIS, rather than [threatening](#) to cut or eliminate them.

The **Child Tax Credit (CTC)** also provides relief to parents each year and allows parenting students to reduce their tax burden and pay for essential needs.

In 2021, Congress expanded the CTC and made the credit a monthly allowance, leading to a record decline in child poverty across the country, and [allowing parenting students](#) to seek out education and training. Lawmakers should expand the CTC permanently and ensure that parenting students are able to tax full advantage of the credit.

Given the intersecting challenges facing parenting students, lawmakers should also fund **comprehensive basic needs supports on campus**, such as basic needs centers, hubs, and other centralized approaches that allow campuses to connect students with the full array of campus supports and public benefits for which they may be eligible. The federal **Basic Needs Grant** should be expanded to serve more institutions and allow schools to replicate evidence-based approaches that result in reduced basic needs insecurity and greater degree completion.



Conclusion

Parenting students bring immense **strength, resourcefulness, and resilience** to the classroom. Consistent with prior research showing that parenting students are [more engaged](#) and have [higher GPAs](#) than their non-parenting peers, parenting students in the current study were more confident that they belonged in college and could succeed academically. However, parenting students also experience a number of challenges and barriers that make them [less likely to complete their credential](#) than non-parenting students. Especially concerning are the high rates of food and housing insecurity found among parenting students in [previous research](#) and replicated in this study. **A growing number of institutions, states, and national organizations are coming together to better address parenting students' needs.** By improving access to childcare, basic needs, and wraparound services for parenting students, community colleges and all higher education institutions can provide the support ecosystems needed for parenting students to achieve their academic goals and build generational wealth.

Endnotes

¹ Students were classified as STEM majors if they (a) selected natural sciences; computer sciences and technology; engineering, manufacturing, and skilled trades; or mathematics and statistics as their major or (b) answered “yes” to the question, “Do you consider yourself to be in a STEM (science, technology, engineering, or math) major/field?”

² [CDC data collected in 2022](#) using the same symptom screeners as the Student Basic Needs Survey (PHQ and GAD) indicated that 7% of U.S. adults experienced moderate or severe levels of anxiety symptoms (compared to 26% in the current study) and 8% experienced moderate or severe levels of depression symptoms (compared to 30% in the current study).

³ Specifically, participants were asked about their use of campus emergency grants, food pantries, food scholarships/vouchers, emergency housing, affordable housing, transportation resources, health or counseling clinics, loaned or free hotspot or laptops, and assistance applying for public benefits. For public benefits, participants were asked about SNAP, WIC, TANF, LIHEAP, utility assistance, housing assistance, Social Security, Disability, Medicaid or public health insurance, unemployment, transportation assistance, earned income and child tax credits, veterans benefits, and services or supports from nongovernmental agencies.

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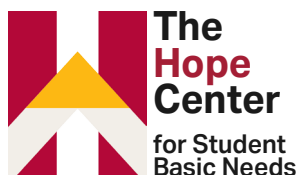
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About The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs

The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs at the Lewis Katz School of Medicine at Temple University is an action-oriented research, policy, and capacity-building center, removing barriers to college student success and well-being through:

- Research: investigating students' lived experiences with basic needs insecurity and evaluating interventions;
- Policy: informing and advocating for systemic policy change to make college more affordable and secure college students' basic needs; and
- Practice: collaborative coaching with colleges, universities, and states on meeting students' basic needs through systems transformation.

To learn more about the report author, Bryce McKibben, and The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs, visit <https://hope.temple.edu/about-hope-center>.

For media inquiries, contact hcpres@temple.edu.

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