



## PATHWAYS TO POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS

Maximizing Opportunities  
for Youth in Poverty

*PATHWAYS to Postsecondary Success* is a five-year project funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and affiliated with UC/ACCORD. It consists of a series of mixed-methods studies of the educational pathways of California's lower-income youth. Through a series of research briefs and reports, the project aims to advance research on poverty, produce useful tools that improve educational practice, and inform the U.S. policy agenda on the relationship between poverty and education.

*College Can Be Complicated* sheds light on the range of responsibilities that low-income single mothers must balance in order to persist in community colleges, and describes what helps and hinders their efforts to do so.

# POLICY REPORT

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## College Can Be Complicated: Low-Income Single Mothers' Experiences in Postsecondary Education

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Community colleges play a central democratizing role in the U.S. postsecondary education system. These institutions pride themselves on a long history of open admissions policies that uphold their mission of serving all segments of society. Indeed, if not for community colleges, the overall higher education system would enroll far fewer racial and ethnic minorities and fewer first generation, low-income, and immigrant students (Bragg & Durham, 2012).

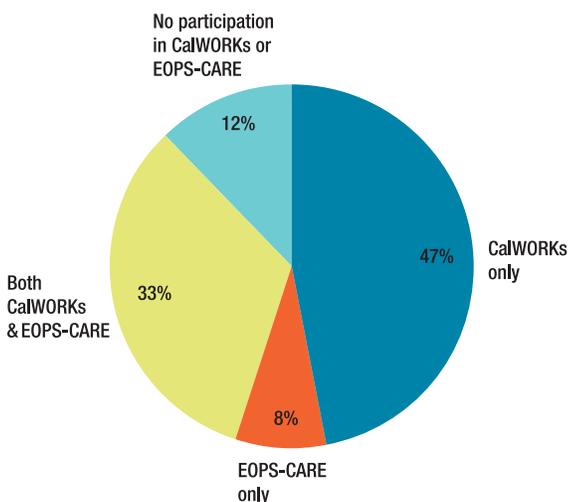
Community colleges serve a diverse student population; 16% of these students are single parents, and a majority of that group are single mothers (Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010). Of all household types in the United States, those headed by single women continue to have the highest poverty rates. In 2010, 32% of households headed by single females were poor, compared to 16% of those headed by single males and 6% of married couple households (National Poverty Center, 2013). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that low-income single mothers who enroll in community colleges may face a range of challenges as they persist to degree or transfer.

**Open access policies are not enough to ensure low-income single mothers complete college.** For many students, open-access policies make it easier to attend college. However, these policies are only the first step; they do not ensure that these students will persist and complete their goals. For students with limited means, multiple taken-for-granted needs must be met in order for schooling to become a realistic part of daily life. For low-income single mothers, these needs include stable housing, steady employment and income, reliable transportation, dependable childcare, and assurance that the basic needs of family members are being met. Only after these necessities are in place can other endeavors such as education become a possibility.

All of California's 112 community colleges have programs borne out of social and education policy that are designed to support low-income single mothers. We highlight two of these programs in this brief: the community college component of California's welfare program, **California Work Opportunities and Responsibilities to Kids (CalWORKs)**, and the **Extended Opportunities and Program Services (EOPS)** program, which offers supplemental services to single mothers via the **Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education (CARE)** program.

We drew on the experiences of 60 low-income single mothers who enrolled in the Landmark Community College District (LCCD).<sup>1</sup> Our study participants were primarily recruited from programs designed to support low-income students. Therefore, it is not surprising that the vast majority (88%) reported being enrolled in the EOPS-CARE and/or CalWORKs programs at some point during their college education (**Figure 1**). One third of our study participants had participated in both.

*Figure 1*  
**Support Program Participation of Sample**



## Research Methods

This policy report draws on a larger qualitative case study that investigated low-income single women's educational pathways in Landmark Community College District (a pseudonym). Located in California, the district has three main campuses that serve approximately 60,000 students whose diversity mirrors the demographics of the state.

A total of 96 low-income women—60 of whom were single mothers—participated in the research. All identified themselves as single and were between the ages of 18 and 30 at the start of the study (65% were 24 or younger). The women were attending or had attended the case study community colleges and lived within the district's geographic area. They were racially and ethnically diverse (34% Latina, 28% African American/black, 23% white, 2% Asian American/Pacific Islander, and 13% multiracial), and all were born in the United States.

Three waves of interviews were conducted between 2010 and 2012. The data used for this report are from the first two waves. The interviews lasted approximately two hours and covered participants' general backgrounds and courses of study, what led them to enroll at the college, their interactions with college and welfare department personnel, and what facilitated or hindered their persistence in college.

In our conversations we learned how the programs often anchored the women to the college. They received meaningful educational guidance tailored to their everyday lives and financial and emotional support as they worked toward their educational goals. At the same time, we also learned that both programs needed to improve their outreach and coordination. With declining state funding, little to no collaboration between programs, and the spotty way that participants were made aware of available supports, the impact of the programs was diminished. Thus, we offer recommendations for how CalWORKs, EOPS-CARE, and similar programs could increase their ability to promote educational attainment among the populations they are designed to serve.

## For single mothers, college is just one of many responsibilities.

**For low-income single mothers, college-going involves the orchestration of multiple people and services.** Often, however, the students themselves may be blamed if they do not complete college, in spite of the wide range of factors and broader socio-economic conditions that can slow or stop a single mother's progress through college (Rose, 2013). It was clear from our research that low-income women who are balancing postsecondary education with motherhood can turn their time and energy toward college only after tending to other parts of their lives. Candice, a 21-year-old mother of a newborn, explained:

*Right now school is not an option, because now it's not just me. I have to worry about daycare, I have to worry about being able to pay for diapers and wipes and my toiletries, and having a roof over our head, and food in our mouths.*

And Holly, who is 28 years old and has a nine-year-old son, shared a similar struggle:

*I'm the only household caregiver...It's not like I can drop my [work] hours or find a different part-time job so I can pursue more schooling. I can't afford it, so I have to take care of my job. Not that school's taking a back seat, but it's just taking a little bit longer to get it done because it can't be the top priority. I can't drop work because that's what's providing for me and my daughter.*

*"Sometimes I have to miss class."*

### Juggling Childcare and School

Julia, a mother of one, explained that sometimes she is forced to miss her classes because she does not have childcare. A brief glance at her weekly schedule makes this challenge clear:

**MONDAY:** In class 8:00–2:30; at work 3:30–8:30. Daughter attends daycare.

**TUESDAY:** At work 10:30–3:30; in class 3:30–5:30. Daycare ends at 3:30, so afternoon coverage for her daughter varies week-to-week.

**WEDNESDAY:** In class 8:00–2:30; at work 3:30–8:30. Daughter attends daycare.

**THURSDAY:** At work 10:30–3:30; in class 3:30–5:30. Daycare ends at 3:30, so afternoon coverage for her daughter varies week-to-week.

**FRIDAY:** In class 8:00–2:30; at work 3:30–8:30. Daughter attends daycare.

**Financial constraints can often get in the way of postsecondary progress.** Almost one third (30%) of our participants cited financial impediments such as low finances, transportation problems, and/or an inability to pay for books that had hindered their educational progress. An even greater number (38%) reported being without stable housing at least once in their lives. And roughly 25% discussed how childcare concerns affected their ability to regularly attend class and persist toward their educational goals. The tight and often inflexible constraints of making sure their children were cared for often led our study participants to miss classes or drop courses altogether.

## Targeted student support programs can promote college persistence.

Programs designed to support low-income students, including EOPS-CARE and CalWORKs, provide a combination of essential financial support and educational guidance. Indeed, 75% of the low-income single mothers in our study who participated in either or both of these two programs found them to be particularly helpful in supporting the achievement of their educational goals. Before we explore what did and did not work, we offer a brief description of each program.

### EOPS-CARE

EOPS was established in California in 1969 to provide financial and academic support to community college students facing educational and socio-economic barriers to academic success. As a sub-component of EOPS, the Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education (CARE) program specifically supports welfare recipient single parents.

EOPS-CARE provides specialized counseling, tutoring, childcare support, work study opportunities, book and transportation grants, emergency student loans, priority registration, social service referrals and advocacy, parenting workshops, and personal development and college survival classes (CCCCO, 2002). Between 2011 and 2012 the program served 76,232 students across California's 112 community colleges (CCCCO, 2012a). At LCCD, 1,287 students were served by the program in the same time period.

#### The EOPS-CARE Mission

- Stimulate and support interest in intellectual, educational, and vocational achievement.
- Recruit and retain EOPS students.
- Provide personal and accessible services.
- Facilitate the transfer and career placement of students.
- Go "above and beyond" the traditional educational and student support programs of the college.
- Positively affect student self-concept and self-esteem.

### CalWORKs Community College Services

The community college component of CalWORKs provides:

- College orientation/intake
- Academic counseling/advising and education planning
- Work study placement and job development
- Advocacy and referrals to specialized support services
- Child care subsidies
- Curriculum development/redesign and instruction

Provision of book vouchers, priority registration, and transportation costs (e.g., gas cards or bus passes) are at the discretion of each college.

### CalWORKs

In 1997, California adopted federal welfare reform known as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), which established the provision of educational services for welfare recipients through the state's community colleges. The state's welfare program, CalWORKs, promotes the economic self-sufficiency of welfare recipient students by providing support services that help them complete their educational goals, find gainful employment, and transition into the workforce.

The policies and practices of the CalWORKs community college program are framed by a "work first" orientation that stresses speedy entry into the labor market. As a result, participants are limited in the kinds of degrees they may pursue and length of time they may stay in college. Of the total 324,777 adult CalWORKs recipients in 2011, 36,232 were students (California Department of Social Services, 2012).<sup>2</sup> A total of 690 students were served through the CalWORKs program at LCCD in the 2011–2012 academic year.

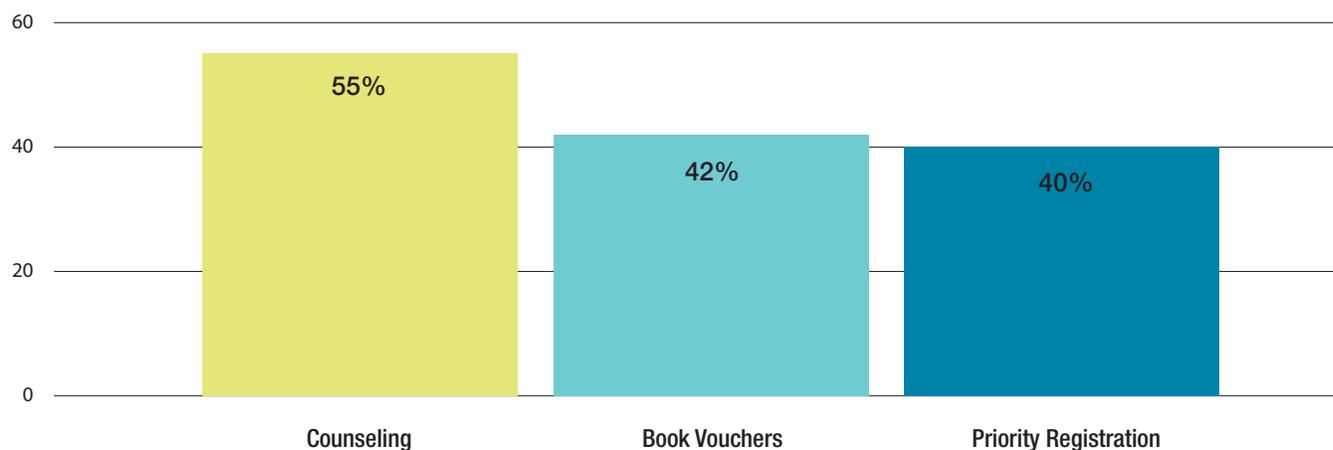
## EOPS-CARE and CalWORKs offer vital student supports.

As noted above, most of the low-income single-mothers in our sample (88%) reported involvement in the EOPS-CARE and/or CalWORKs programs. When these women were asked which parts of the program were most helpful, they said they especially appreciated the counseling experiences (55%), the provision of vouchers to help pay for books and supplies (42%), and priority registration that enabled them to enroll in high demand and increasingly unavailable required courses (40%) (Figure 2). As Nina, a 23-year-old mother, explained:

*I honestly did not believe that they were going to have so many different benefits with EOPS. They have a ton of stuff I had no idea about. The supplemental childcare helped. That helped out a lot... [And] the meal tickets, that helped out a ton. And the book voucher. The counseling is what really got me [through]...EOPS is one of the biggest blessings. I can't go through school without that.*

The perceived benefits of each of these high impact services are discussed in detail in the sections that follow.

Figure 2  
EOPS-CARE and CalWORKs Services Considered Most Helpful



## Personalized Counseling Facilitates Students' Progress

**Educational planning and guidance are tailored to students' schedules and lives.** Educational planning is one of the core features of the counseling services provided by CalWORKs and EOPS-CARE, and over half of this study's participants (55%) said this type of support and guidance was particularly helpful. Program counselors help students select their educational goals (e.g., an associate's degree, certificate, or transfer) and plan out the sequence of courses needed to complete them. Lupe, a 21-year-old mother of two, explained how her EOPS-CARE counselor's personalized approach allowed for a more meaningful exchange of information:

*He has kids himself, so he knows how difficult it is, and I can go to him. I've seen other counselors, but it seems like they don't give me all the information that I need to know. But if I go to him and ask the same thing, I'm getting completely different answers....He explains it more.*

*“That’s why I’m here.”*

## The Value of Personalized Counseling

“The CalWORKs counselors actually sit there and they help you figure out your goal plan and everything. When you go to admissions, they just sit there and look at you and ask you, ‘What do you want to do?’ It’s like, ‘Well, I’m a first time student; that’s why I’m here. For you to help me figure out what I want to do, and help me get in that direction.’”

— Samantha, 22-year-old mother of one

In general, the program counselors provided students with concrete guidance that was more relevant to their daily lives and better facilitated the achievement of their educational goals. As a result, these single mothers better understood how to navigate college and turn the unfamiliar into the familiar. Lupe’s counselor provided her with detailed advice about what classes and pathways were available and how to balance school, work, and parenting so she could be more successful in her studies. Because her counselor acknowledged the multiple roles that a single mother fulfills in her daily life, his advice had real life applicability and better prepared Lupe for success.

**Counselors provide information that meets students where they are.** The counselors who were most helpful did not assume that students knew how to navigate college (e.g., plan their course sequences, enroll in classes, successfully complete FAFSA forms, etc.). Instead, EOPS-CARE and CalWORKs counselors were able to identify students’ degrees of knowledge and prior exposure to postsecondary education. They could then tailor their advice to students’ specific situations and provide information that resonated with them, resulting in more productive and meaningful counseling sessions.

## Book vouchers ease financial constraints and facilitate persistence.

**The high cost of course materials can prevent students’ continuous enrollment.** Textbooks are a significant expense for college students, costing as much as \$400.00 each semester for a student enrolled full-time. It is not surprising, then, that a significant number of participants noted that this was one of the main financial constraints that limited their ability to attend college. It is also no surprise that 42% of the women cited book vouchers as one of most helpful supports provided by the EOPS-CARE and CalWORKs programs. Sandy, who is 26 years old and has two children, explained that if she “took a lot of classes and had to buy the books for them, that [would] be basically all of my money....I’d just probably have to take one class.”

**Interruptions in financial assistance can disrupt students’ trajectories.** Importantly, the book vouchers were central enough to these women’s educational persistence and success that any problems with the program threatened their ability to stay enrolled. Laura, a 22-year-old mother of one, experienced a delayed release of funding due to statewide budget cuts, and this resulted in a negative balance in her bank account:

*[W]hen I went to get my books I had to pay for more than what I expected. And so I was negative in my bank account....I didn’t quit school because I needed my books, but I’m thinking of next semester, if all the programs are not available...I might have to take a semester off.*

## Priority registration allows faster progress toward completion.

### Access to required coursework is not guaranteed.

Since 2009, California's community college system has suffered a 12% budget cut and, as a result, community colleges statewide have been forced to cut the number of courses they offer (Baron, 2012). This makes it more difficult for students to enroll in the courses they need to progress toward degree completion. Increasingly limited access to required courses is particularly detrimental for CalWORKs students, who have a finite amount of time in the program to achieve financial independence. Using education as a means to achieve this independence proves difficult when they are unable to get the classes they need in a timely manner.

**Priority registration can speed progress toward transfer or degree.** Given the limited availability of necessary courses, priority access becomes especially important; two fifths (40%) of participants cited it as one of the most helpful components of EOPS-CARE and CalWORKs. For example, Paula, a mother of three, remembers the frustration of “being that student that didn’t have priority registration” because she “couldn’t get into any of the hard classes.” Now, as a CalWORKs student, she has access to the rigorous courses she needs to complete her program.

Importantly, priority registration is standard in the EOPS-CARE program but it is not mandated across all CalWORKs community college programs; instead, it is left to each college's discretion. LCCD does offer it through their CalWORKs program, as well as through EOPS-CARE.

## Limited resources and poor communication reduce support program effects.

**Budget cuts impede programmatic efforts to support low-income students.** It is clear that key features of the EOPS-CARE and CalWORKs programs are especially important in single mothers' efforts to achieve college credentials, but our data also show that there are limits to what they can do. Even before California's budget crisis, LCCD and these two programs had been forced to contend with stretched resources and high student-to-counselor ratios. In recent years, these important programs have experienced multiple funding cuts that have further affected their vital supports and negatively impacted community colleges' most vulnerable students (**Table 1**).

Table 1

### Recent Funding Cuts in Student Support Programs

#### CalWORKs

- Between 2009 and 2012, the California legislature cut funding for welfare-to-work services (including education and training) and childcare by approximately \$375 million each year.
- Spending on CalWORKs has declined sharply since the state implemented welfare reform in the 1990s. It now accounts for less than 3% of the state budget.
- In 2009–2010, LCCD's CalWORKs program sustained a 39% reduction in funding that has not been restored.

#### EOPS-CARE

- EOPS funds dropped from \$106.3 to \$64.1 million between FY 2008–2009 and FY 2009–2010.
- A funding freeze for EOPS-CARE began in FY 2010–2011.<sup>†</sup>
- Each college's EOPS-CARE program was cut 40% based on their FY 2008–2009 allocation of funds.
- CARE funds dropped from \$15.5 million to \$9.3 million between FY 2008–2009 and FY 2009–2010.
- Despite these cuts, participation was steady or increased at many colleges.

Sources: California Budget Project, 2012; California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2012a, 2012b; M. Jacobs, personal communication, March 2013

<sup>†</sup> CARE later received \$36,925 in reallocated funds.

*“That would have totally helped.”*

## The Need for Outreach

“[I wish I had known about] all the services.... I had to pay for my own books the first semester I came here. I had a math book that was \$190.00, and I had my sign language book, which was \$80.00, but...they didn't tell me... about [the] services. That would have totally helped.”

— Karen, 25-year-old mother of two

**Students are not always aware of relevant sources of assistance and aid.** One third (33%) of our study participants noted that they were not initially aware of student support programs like EOPS-CARE and CalWORKs when they arrived at LCCD. While the majority were referred to the CalWORKs program by their caseworkers, a significant number learned about both the EOPS-CARE and CalWORKs programs via word of mouth from friends and family members or by stumbling upon them online or on campus. In short, the college itself played only a minor role regarding how participants became aware of such programs, a pattern that is true not only for single mothers but also for low-income students more generally (Park, Cerven, Nations, & Nielsen, 2013).

The CalWORKs Program Handbook explicitly states that college CalWORKs programs must be in “a recognizable location on campus that is easily identifiable as a program that provides specialized and comprehensive support services to CalWORKs students” (CCCCO, 2010, p. 2). Given that some study participants were unaware that this program even existed on campus, it appears that this policy mandate has not been fully realized.

### **Lack of coordination between support programs can make it difficult for students to utilize services.**

In spite of how much participants spoke of EOPS-CARE and CalWORKs, and in spite of how much the missions of the two programs overlap, virtually no one mentioned any sort of coordination between the two. Instead, participants experienced them as operating in separate and independent fashions. There are, however, policies that outline the nature of the relationship between them. For example, California Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) policy currently restricts students from “doubling-up” on similar support services offered by CalWORKs and EOPS-CARE but does not outline strategies to better coordinate these programs so that low-income single mothers are more systematically exposed to the beneficial services they provide (California DPSS, 2010).<sup>3</sup> Nina, a 23-year-old mother of one, described the frustration she felt as she tried to sort out what was available to her:

*I think [the college] needs a program to help students to get their stuff together. Because all the programs are so scattered that there's no one person....I think there needs to be another entity where they have help for students just for that. Because I think it would make that a lot less stressful, especially for new single moms.*

Better coordination of educational and social policies and the provision of their beneficial services would provide low-income single mothers with a greater safety net and promote college-going as a realistic regular part of their lives.

## EOPS-CARE and CalWORKs: What Helps and What Hinders

### HELPS

- Counseling/educational planning
- Book vouchers
- Priority registration

### HINDERS

- Declining state support that eliminates supports
- Haphazard exposure to programs
- Poor coordination between programs

## Summary and Implications

Longtime advocates for low-income students have consistently argued that people “from poor communities need social policy that involves schools and enrichment programs, but [they] also need programs to address the conditions that devastate students’ lives” (Rose, 2013, p. 2). In other words, educational policies designed to serve low-income students are helpful, but they cannot solve the problem of poverty. Instead, we need to do more to provide students like low-income single mothers with a stronger safety net to ensure that their essential needs are met. Only then can college be a realistic practice in their daily lives.

Effective support programs can have a positive impact on students’ ability to meaningfully engage with higher education. The provision of financial resources (e.g., book vouchers), informed counseling, and priority registration, for example, help ensure that students who juggle the responsibilities of school with complicated obligations to their families not only access higher education, but are also able to return and persist toward their educational goals. But declining support for and poor coordination between student support programs jeopardize low-income students’ postsecondary success.

In an effort to support the aspects of student support programs that are working well for low-income community college students, including the single mothers who are profiled in this brief, and to ameliorate the problems that have emerged in these programs, we offer the following recommendations:

- **Improve general counseling so that it tends to the individual realities of students’ personal and academic lives.** Navigating a postsecondary pathway can be complicated, confusing, and overwhelming, especially when it understandably comes second to personal and familial responsibilities. The personalized counseling that our study participants received helped them find the paths that worked for them. General counselors should receive training and resources that allow them to provide the same level of support, so that students receive the information they need from the outset.
- **Make book vouchers and priority registration standard services in all support programs that serve low-income students.** These program aspects allowed EOPS-CARE and CalWORKs students to enroll (and stay enrolled) in important courses. But these supports are not currently available through all programs, which means that some students are shut out of required classes and/or forced to limit or discontinue their schooling to save money. We know from other research that when a student “stops out” of college, it increases the likelihood that she will never complete a degree (Terriquez, Gurantz, & Gomez, 2013). Book vouchers and priority registration are two simple ways to

address this problem, and they should be implemented as broadly as possible. Of course the most effective way to remedy students' inability to enroll in the courses they need would be to redirect some of the colleges' resources to expand the number of courses offered. Taking such action would eliminate the need for priority registration in the first place. Short of that, however, the difficulties created by limited course availability must be acknowledged and addressed.

- **Coordinate student support programs and bolster efforts to make students aware of them.** Linking the EOPS-CARE program to the CalWORKs program would better expose single mothers to a wider range of campus resources available to them—including financial aid (e.g., book vouchers, stipends for school supplies, supplemental funds for childcare) and counseling—and facilitate their movement between programs. A collaborative network between all programs that serve low-income single mothers would reduce the haphazard way that students become aware of support programs.
- **Establish a collaborative working relationship between the county and support programs for low-income single parents.** Welfare department caseworkers should regularly and consistently inform welfare recipients who attend community colleges about the CalWORKs program. Likewise, they should inform students about other programs (like EOPS-CARE) that are designed to support people exactly like them. Indeed, established relationships between government and campus programs would facilitate students' exposure to and transitions between the welfare department, specific colleges, and their embedded programs.

- **Reinstate our commitment to funding student programs that aid low-income students.** We need a renewed commitment to supporting underserved student populations and the programs aimed at addressing their needs if educational practice is to match political rhetoric. These services are central to students' success, and current budget constraints are having very real effects on the students these programs are meant to support. A renewed commitment to the allocation of state and federal funds to such programs together with policy that recognizes the value of improved coordination will better ensure the presence and success of low-income single mothers in higher education.

## Notes

- 1 This and all other names used in this brief are pseudonyms.
- 2 The CDSS reports the total number of recipients per month (an average of 1,442,770 in 2011) and the number of child recipients (over 1 million each month). We subtracted the number of children from the total number of recipients for each month in 2011; the average across months yielded this total number of adult participants.
- 3 DPSS policy states that, per federal Title IV financial aid regulations, student support services are not to exceed a student's total cost of attendance. CalWORKs participants are not to receive duplicative services if they are enrolled in both EOPS-CARE and CalWORKs.

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