

2020/2021 HIGHER ED TOOLKIT FOR SUPPORTING STUDENT PARENTS


As colleges and universities welcome students back this fall, whether in-person, online, or with a hybrid model, it is imperative that they consider the needs of parenting students. Although one in five college students is parenting nationwide, student parents remain a largely invisible population. The vast majority of institutions do not track parenting status and therefore do not know how many student parents they have at any given time or how to ensure their success. Because most colleges and universities were not addressing the very real needs of this population prior to COVID-19, meeting those needs, which have now been exacerbated by the pandemic, is even more difficult.

In May 2020, [Generation Hope](#), a nonprofit organization that helps teen parents earn their college degrees while also helping their children get ready for kindergarten, in partnership with Imaginable Futures, Chegg.org, the Institute for Women's Policy Research, and The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, launched a national student parent survey to gain insight into the higher ed experiences of parenting students. A report of the findings and recommendations, entitled "[Uncovering the Student Parent Experience and its Impact on College Success](#)," sheds light on an incredibly tenacious and driven student population that often feels unwelcome and disconnected as a result of significant gaps in institutional culture, policies, and physical space. While the survey was conducted prior to the pandemic, the report contains valuable insights for helping colleges and universities consider the needs of this population in their COVID-19 response plans.

To further assist institutions during this time, Generation Hope has compiled this toolkit with the support of [The Seldin/Haring-Smith Foundation](#) to highlight the top 10 things colleges can do to ensure their 2020/2021 academic year plans are considering the needs of student parents. The toolkit is informed by a focus group held in July 2020 with five Generation Hope Scholars, all teen parents attending two and four-year colleges, as well as observations in our case management, mental health services, career support, home visiting, tuition assistance, and now virtual trainings provided to 80 Scholars attending 20 two and four-year schools since the pandemic began in March. During the pandemic, our wraparound, tailored supports helped 93% of our Scholars successfully complete their spring semester, and 95% earn GPAs of 2.5 or higher.



QUICK STATS ON STUDENT PARENTS

AN ESTIMATED
52% 
of undergraduate [student parents left school without a degree](#) within six years, compared to 32% of students without children¹

STUDENT PARENTS TEND TO HAVE
HIGHER GPAs
than their non-parenting peers²




51%
of student parents [are students of color](#)³



51%
of student parents are more likely than their non-parenting peers to [have low incomes](#)⁴

¹ Melissa Emrey-Arras. More Information Could Help Student Parents Access Additional Federal Student Aid. Report no. GAO-19-522, Washington, DC, GAO, Aug. 2019. GAO, www.gao.gov/assets/710/701002.pdf. Accessed 30 Mar. 2020.

² Lindsey Reichlin Cruse, Tessa Holtzman, Barbara Gault, David Croom, and Portia Polk. Parents in College By the Numbers. Washington, DC, IWPR, 11 Apr. 2019. Fact Sheet #C481. Institute for Women's Policy Research, <https://iwpr.org/iwpr-issues/student-parent-success-initiative/parents-in-college-by-the-numbers/>. Accessed 11 Aug. 2020.

³ Lindsey Reichlin Cruse, Tessa Holtzman, Barbara Gault, David Croom, and Portia Polk. Parents in College By the Numbers. Washington, DC, IWPR, 11 Apr. 2019. Fact Sheet #C481. Institute for Women's Policy Research, <https://iwpr.org/iwpr-issues/student-parent-success-initiative/parents-in-college-by-the-numbers/>. Accessed 11 Aug. 2020.

⁴ Barbara Gault, Lindsey Reichlin, Elizabeth Reynolds, and Meghan Froehner. 4.8 Million College Students are Raising Children. Washington, DC, IWPR, Nov. 2014. Fact Sheet #C424. IWPR, <https://iwpr.org/iwpr-issues/student-parent-success-initiative/4-8-million-college-students-are-raising-children/>. Accessed 11 Aug. 2020.

TOP 10 things colleges and universities can do **now** to ensure student parents are not left behind during the 2020/2021 academic year.



1 MAKE SURE A STUDENT PARENT IS ON YOUR REOPENING TASK FORCE

Nearly all institutions have pulled together a task force to work on their COVID-19 response plans with the goal of determining the best way to resume classes while ensuring safety for the school community. It is imperative that the voices of parenting college students are involved in that planning. For example, to address the digital divide, some colleges have provided internet access in campus parking lots for students without consistent internet access, but may not have taken into consideration how difficult this would be as a parent with children sitting in the backseat for hours. [Here is a template for a family-friendly job description](#) for a student parent task force member.



2 ESTABLISH AND/OR INCREASE EMERGENCY AID AND REMOVE BARRIERS TO THAT AID

The financial impacts of COVID-19 are enduring. So many students, including those caring for dependent children, are unable to pay for bills, rent, and groceries right now. In fact, according to The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, [53% of parenting college students were food insecure even before the pandemic](#). More emergency aid is needed to help student parents survive the pandemic. If you do not have an emergency aid program and/or if you need assistance with administering an aid program through the CARES Act, [Edquity](#) provides guides and resources to help. In your disbursement plans, ensure that your emergency aid identifies parenting as a priority for support and that students receive the funds quickly. Note that undocumented students are not eligible for funding. Providing unrestricted, emergency funding to parenting students, regardless of immigration status, can make your emergency aid more comprehensive. Generation Hope has an emergency fund for our students, including our DREAMers, with funds being disbursed within 72 hours of the request. Additionally, reducing fees and tuition wherever possible is crucial for all students, but especially student parents who tend to have low incomes and are experiencing so many financial impacts from COVID-19.



3 COMMIT TO ASYNCHRONOUS LEARNING

College students with parenting responsibilities are feeling nearly every impact of the pandemic. They need flexibility now more than ever. They are caring for young children, assisting with online instruction for children in K-12, trying to meet the needs of other family members, working or struggling through job loss, and possibly navigating the challenges of loved ones who have been diagnosed with COVID-19. Requiring that all students participate in online instruction at the same time for long periods is nearly impossible for parenting students who need flexibility throughout the day to meet their various obligations. If professors are committed to holding synchronous sessions, make sure they are recorded and available to all students afterwards. Student parents have also found group projects to be incredibly difficult as other group members are not often understanding of their schedules. Professors can create other options for students to submit their work so they do not feel like participating in a group project is the only way they can convey their understanding of a topic.



I have five younger siblings. It's eight of us in this house. So, for me, I couldn't separate home from work. I couldn't handle it all. I had my son on my hip, and we couldn't find space for everyone. It was really chaotic. I have an internship online, too. So sometimes I'm sitting in front of the computer for twelve hours straight."

– Generation Hope Scholar



4 CREATE A FAMILY-FRIENDLY SYLLABUS

When professors acknowledge parenting responsibilities in their syllabi, it communicates to student parents that they are valued and can share their needs and situations openly with instructors. Our report found that 21% of student parents do not feel comfortable disclosing their parenting status to faculty and staff in part because of past negative experiences and/or fear of how it will be received. During the pandemic, open communication is critical for student success, and a syllabus that embraces parenting responsibilities is key. [Here is a sample of syllabus language](#) that communicates that students with children are welcome and that their needs will be considered.



5 SEND A WELCOME EMAIL THAT EMBRACES PARENTING

To go one step further in ensuring that student parents feel supported, professors can mention a willingness to work with students who are parenting in their welcome emails at the start of the semester. [Here is a sample of a welcome email.](#)

6 ENSURE FACULTY AND STAFF ARE BEING MORE FLEXIBLE THAN EVER BEFORE... ESPECIALLY WITH PARENTS

It is often important to name the need for flexibility with parenting students' responsibilities by talking explicitly about how this flexibility applies to student parents. For example, professors may need to make special accommodations for students who have lost childcare and can't make a presentation at a designated time. Financial aid officers may need to prioritize approving appeals for Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) requirements so that students are not penalized for dropping/failing classes that were abruptly moved online during the pandemic. Those working in the bursar's or cashier's office may need to spend more time explaining fees and costs as parents try to navigate the financial losses of the pandemic. It is vital to talk about how important this is for students with children because there is often an assumption that very few college students are parenting. Additionally, it is critical to encourage flexibility across the institution. For example, many college and university faculty and staff are likely also dealing with the challenges of working while parenting. [See #kidsoncampus on Twitter for the ongoing conversation about this.](#)



7 ENHANCE ALL SUPPORT SERVICES

In order to ensure that student parents — and all marginalized students — have a successful 2020/2021 academic year, colleges and universities will need to go beyond the traditional scope of student services to provide more holistic support. Advising will need to include connection to community resources and regular wellness checks for students, particularly if they are parenting. Mental health services will need to be more robust and accessible and include inquiries about children's mental health needs. Faculty and staff will need to ensure that they are responding to emails or calls from students quickly. A Generation Hope Scholar recalled calling her school's mental health hotline only to be walked through what felt like a cold checklist of questions by the counselor on the phone. Generation Hope has provided 100 one-on-one counseling sessions to our students over the past six months, and this has been critical to their ability to stay enrolled. In many cases, colleges don't have to reinvent the wheel to ensure their students have the support they need. For example, to help students who may need to make adjustments to their aid package, the financial aid office can share the free online tool, [SwiftStudent](#), which helps students create and submit their appeal letters. Government and community partnerships can also be extremely helpful. [Find out more about Generation Hope's Project Persist services for colleges and universities.](#)



8 BUILD COMMUNITY



Our report found that even before the pandemic, nearly half of parenting students felt somewhat disconnected from fellow students and faculty. Social distancing and campus closures have made it even more challenging for this population to feel a part of their college community. Institutions should also find ways to build community among parenting students on an ongoing basis, but it is even more critical during this time. Special virtual events and informal opportunities to connect that consider student parents' unique experiences are key to making sure they feel valued, seen, and supported in a difficult time. For a list of ideas for unique virtual activities for parenting students, [click here](#).

9 OFFER VIRTUAL SUPPORTS FOR CHILDREN

Many parenting college students have lost childcare that was vital in helping them work toward their degree, and many school districts are continuing online K–12 learning in the fall. This means that student parents are stretched thin as they care for their children in the midst of this pandemic. They are not only worried about their children's learning but also their emotional wellbeing, and these concerns can prevent parents from focusing on their courses. Virtual events and activities for children can be a way to provide enrichment opportunities from afar. Mailing kid-friendly supplies, such as coloring books and arts and crafts can also make a difference. Simply sending resources to parenting students for their children's online learning can be helpful. Generation Hope has been hosting Facebook Live [bedtime stories](#) with guest readers every week since the pandemic began to support families and provide a fun activity for children.



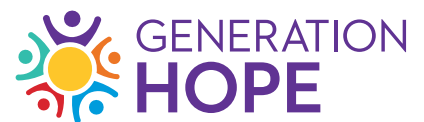
10 CREATE AS MUCH CERTAINTY AS POSSIBLE FOR STUDENT PARENTS

The uncertainty of 2020/2021 plans for childcare, K–12, and higher ed is overwhelming for parenting college students, and the recent killings of Black Americans at the hands of police and the backlash to the Black Lives Matter protests have created even more anxiety. Institutions can create and commit to plans for the fall and spring semesters as early as possible to allow all students to plan ahead. This is especially important for parenting students who need to make provisions for their children and finalize their schedules. These plans should be overly communicated and should explicitly state expectations for students — whether hybrid or online — as well as the support that will be available to ensure those expectations can be met. Additionally, institutions can assure students that they are committed to racial equity work internally and externally, not just with official statements, but also with actions that include a sensitivity to and an understanding of what students of color, particularly Black students, are experiencing right now.



“When they started doing the protests, I started thinking ‘how can I talk to my son about all of this?’”

– Generation Hope Scholar



Generation Hope offers technical assistance for colleges across the country that would like to expand their capacity to serve student parents. If you are interested in this support, please contact us at info@supportgenerationhope.org.

supportgenerationhope.org

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