



HIGHER EDUCATION AND STUDENT PARENT SUPPORTS

The Barriers, Challenges, and
Opportunities

CONTENTS

Executive Summary	1
Background and Methodology	2
Barriers to Supports for Student Parents	2–4
What do Colleges Need?	5
Focus Group Recommendations	6–8



FOR MORE THAN TEN YEARS, Generation Hope has implemented a holistic, direct service model to help teen parents (Scholars) pursue their degrees at more than twenty colleges and universities in the D.C. metro area. This support has included mentorship, college and career prep, emergency aid, financial assistance, mental health services, and much more. In the past three years, that support has expanded to include the children of Generation Hope Scholars to formalize a **two-generation model**, providing emotional support, financial assistance, and social capital for the whole family. In 2019, Generation Hope recognized the need to build upon our direct work with families in the D.C. metro area to address the systemic challenges that young parents and student parents face in various systems across the country, especially within the postsecondary sector. Building on our partnerships within higher education and effective boots-on-the ground work with parenting students, Generation Hope launched FamilyU, a technical assistance program designed to build the capacity of higher education institutions to drive better outcomes for student parents. Generation Hope's commitment to centering the voices of student parents in our work grounds our service to Scholars and their families and guides our approach.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since its founding in March 2010, Generation Hope has provided holistic support to more than 200 teen parents as they pursue their college degrees. The work of Generation Hope has also reached more than 1,000 expecting and parenting teens through college-readiness workshops in schools, churches, and organizations across the D.C. Metro area, and we have sought out new, more expansive ways to transform the higher education system to support student parents. In 2019, Generation Hope began developing a plan for large-scale work designed to improve systems to better support student parents. This commitment to student parent advocacy and uplifting the student parent voice led to the launch of [FamilyU](#), a technical assistance program that supports higher education institutions in enhancing their student parent efforts. This includes a cohort-based, two-year learning experience for select institutions. The data being shared in this report was used to inform the cohort-based FamilyU experience.

The goal of this report is to help education leaders further understand the perennial challenges faced by student parents and to share the recommendations of their colleagues and the lived experiences of student parents. Our qualitative study undergirds the research in the student parent success field by elevating the anecdotal experience of current student parents. Ultimately, our learnings reinforce the need for a stronger, systemic approach to meeting student parent needs. To promote student parent enrollment, persistence, and graduation, education leaders must approach the needs of student parents, not as an add-on or discrete intervention, but as an integral part of the academic program and college experience.

This report examines the barriers, challenges, and opportunities to student parent success based on regional focus group conversations. In particular, the perspectives of student parent participants highlighted varying degrees of support and opportunity to reach their personal and academic goals depending on the institution type, as well as their racial identity. As most student parents identify as Black or Hispanic, the intersection of race and parent status can make navigating the higher education system even more difficult and underscores the need for colleges and universities to connect their student parent supports with their race equity efforts.

Generation Hope strongly believes in the power and expertise of student parents as the leaders of their own lives and the best consultants for this work. This report would not be possible without the important contributions of Generation Hope Scholars and many other student parents who shared their time, stories, and dreams with us. Many thanks also to the education leaders and funders across the country who were candid in sharing their knowledge — and knowledge gaps — and in identifying timely and actionable solutions. Together, their critical input allowed us to surface the challenges and opportunities for education leaders pursuing stronger support for student parents.

Sincerely,



Nicole Lynn Lewis

Founder & CEO, Generation Hope

STUDENT PARENTS MAKE UP 22%

of today's undergraduate student population, but their needs are largely overlooked by our higher education system.¹



APPROXIMATELY 1 IN 5 undergraduate students are caring for a dependent while attending school and working at least part-time (IWPR, 2019).²

Student parents are more likely than students without children to be students of color:

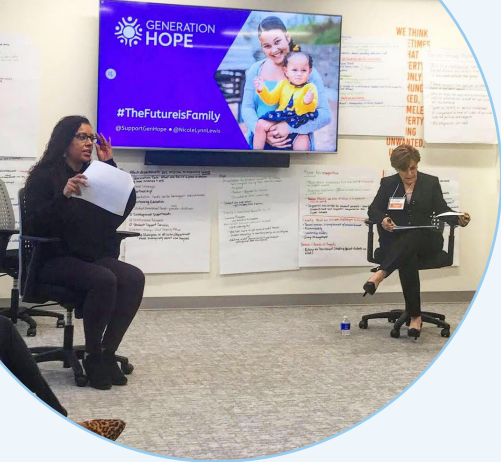
51% COMPARED WITH 46%
OF STUDENTS WITHOUT CHILDREN.



A FULL OR PART-TIME JOB, DAYCARE, COURSEWORK, LACK OF RESOURCES, AND EVERY DAY FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES

make a postsecondary credential a critical, but challenging goal to reach — especially when trying to navigate a higher education system that was not designed to support today's students.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these challenges for the millions of student parents who are still enrolled in postsecondary institutions. This is important to note in light of a 13% decrease in overall freshmen enrollment in fall 2020.³ It has also highlighted the perennial challenges faced by student parents stemming from structural barriers that have made them ten times less likely to graduate⁴ than their peers without dependents. A recent Child Trends study found that in nearly one in five households with children, a student who planned to enroll for the Fall 2020 term changed their college plans due to caregiving responsibilities — suggesting that the COVID-19 pandemic created significant challenges in meeting student caregiving needs.⁵ Even before the pandemic, students with dependents who wanted to earn a postsecondary degree persisted through disproportionate rates of poverty, threatened economic and social mobility, and significant time and caregiving demands, while maintaining higher GPAs on average than their nonparenting peers.⁶



“Student parents are still really invisible and not thought of much.”

JESSICA

MIDWEST FOCUS GROUP



BARRIERS TO SUCCESS

FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A
PRACTITIONER AND THAT
OF A STUDENT PARENT

1 Practitioner Perspective

- ▶ Lack of data collection
- ▶ Shortage of financial and staff capacity
- ▶ Lack of campus-wide policies establishing clear student parent supports

2 Student Parent Perspective

- ▶ Lack of information on campus resources for student parents
- ▶ Lack of affordable and flexible childcare solutions
- ▶ Unwelcoming campus culture

BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

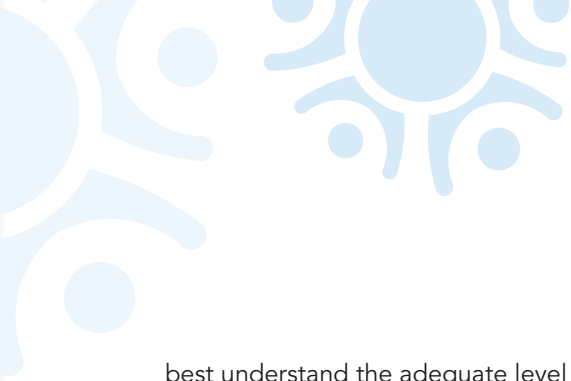
In March 2020, Generation Hope held the first in a series of four focus groups to inform our forthcoming technical assistance program. We also endeavored to understand the ways in which institutions were already thinking about student parent efforts and what roadblocks often prevented them from implementing those supports. From March 2020 through September 2020, we gathered qualitative data from more than 72 student parents and higher education practitioners (e.g. institutional leadership, student success managers, financial aid officers, researchers) from across the country, representing a mix of institution types. This report details the high-level findings of those conversations and provides context for our call to action for colleges and universities to better address the needs of student parents — not only coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, but in the long term.

BARRIERS TO SUPPORT FOR STUDENT PARENTS

LACK OF DATA

Student parents are more susceptible to stopping out of postsecondary programs due to a myriad of factors, but chief among them is a lack of institutional support. While many special student populations (i.e. veterans, first-generation college students, etc.) have been prioritized within the higher education community, student parents are often lumped together with adult learners or left out of the conversation completely. Though student parents make up a large percentage of the undergraduate population, they still remain invisible largely because institutions do not have a good sense of how many students are parenting on their campuses. This lack of awareness was confirmed when we asked our focus group participants about their challenges in helping student parents thrive. “Not collecting data or identifying student parents” was cited as a major barrier in each focus group when it comes to providing or increasing student parent support.

Many institutions do not collect data on student parents because of hesitancy around the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act ([FERPA](#)), but there are ways to collect this data and be in compliance with FERPA requirements. According to the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), “student affairs administrators need to have enough data to



best understand the adequate level and range of care needed for student parents.”⁷ Research and [recent state legislation](#) have introduced new methods of data collection and approaches to tracking student parent achievement that do not challenge FERPA restrictions, but allow institutions to better understand student parent needs and create more equitable college outcomes.⁸ Colleges have a responsibility to identify the student parent population as they do other populations of students.

The need for institutional data is clear: We know that what does not get measured does not get prioritized. We also know that it is difficult to understand the experiences or needs of any group of students if you do not have a sense of who they are or their educational outcomes.

LACK OF FINANCIAL RESOURCES AND STAFF CAPACITY

The COVID-19 pandemic has strained the already meager financial support received by many community colleges — where the largest share of student parents are found — and small universities, making new student parent efforts a challenge for some institutions. As state appropriations for higher education have lessened over time, higher education institutions are finding themselves more dependent on tuition and student fees even as enrollment declines.⁹ When we asked focus group attendees about the financial constraints on providing more support for student parents, they specifically mentioned needing resources for training and additional staff. They shared first-hand accounts of limited Title IX knowledge among faculty and staff and no central location within the institution for student parent supports. The student parents in attendance reinforced these needs by sharing that faculty and staff often contribute to an unwelcoming campus culture that systematically ostracizes them. Both perspectives lend themselves to the need for resources to support staff training and the development of campus-wide policies and programming to advance student parent success.

LACK OF STUDENT PARENT POLICIES

Most institutions do not have student-parent-specific policies to guide their supports for this population. This means that students, faculty, and staff are often left to handle the needs of these students on a case-by-case basis that may not align with an institution’s strategic priorities or values. Practitioners in each group identified “No kids on campus” policies as being inhibitors to building a childcare center and creating other family-friendly supports. Student parent attendees similarly noted the challenges of unclear or nonexistent information about whether children are allowed in classrooms in the event of childcare emergencies.

There was also a common theme in the focus groups that information about policies and programming may not be getting to the students who need it. For example, a student parent participant did not learn about a family-friendly study area at her institution until a professor from her school mentioned it during the focus group conversation.

ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES TO STUDENT PARENT SUCCESS

- ▶ Feelings of isolation
- ▶ Balancing a challenging and heavy workload
- ▶ Lack of affordable childcare
- ▶ Rigid class meeting times that do not align with parents’ availability
- ▶ Unrealistic office hours for key staff (financial aid officers, career counselors, etc.)
- ▶ Student parents not seen as stakeholders in decision-making on campus
- ▶ Stigma around being a young parent
- ▶ Academically selective culture at four-year institutions that feels exclusive of student parents



STUDENT PARENT IMPLICATIONS BY INSTITUTION TYPE

The majority of student parents are enrolled at community colleges,¹⁰ which were designed to be more responsive to community needs. While there are many benefits to attending community colleges as a student parent, our focus group feedback showed that holistic support for student parents at both community colleges and four-year institutions is largely inconsistent. While some student attendees experienced supportive professors and small, but thriving student parent communities on their campuses, many more found professors less likely to be accommodating when an issue regarding their child arose, and this experience was consistent across institution type. While community colleges tend to be more attuned to the needs of the student parent population, they typically have fewer resources to provide support. On the contrary, our focus group participants experienced four-year institutions as typically having the finances to provide support for student parents but being largely unaware of student parents among their student body.



“

When a student moves from a two-year to a four-year institution, they lose crucial support resources and a feeling of belonging among other student parents.”

STUDENT PARENT

FOCUS GROUP ATTENDEE

WHAT DO COLLEGES NEED?

Conversations within each focus group illuminated a dearth of data and understanding of student parent enrollment and experiences. Attendees consistently identified the following needs at postsecondary institutions to better support student parents:

- ▶ Student parent data-tracking.
- ▶ Comprehensive training on student parent needs from Title IX to financial aid to in-classroom interactions.
- ▶ An overhaul of inflexible policies and procedures that systematically create barriers for student parents.
- ▶ Resources to support student-facing staff members in accommodating student parent needs.

Many also pointed to the need for more family-friendly physical spaces and characteristics including, but not limited to:

- ▶ Childcare centers
- ▶ Family housing
- ▶ On-campus diaper changing stations
- ▶ Lactation rooms

When we asked about what is necessary for colleges to do this work, student parents emphasized the authentic inclusion of student parents and a shift in campus culture. Student parents also expressed their frustration in being left out of decision making conversations when it comes to policies that impact them.

Another need that was expressed in each of the focus groups was the imperative to connect student parent work to institutions' strategic priorities and to show the return on investment for committing resources to this work. Often, the most important metrics for colleges and universities are enrollment, retention, and completion. The connection between investing in student parents and reaching higher enrollment, retention, and completion rates must be clear — especially to institutional leadership.

Lastly, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented an opportunity to leverage conversations about the changing economy, future of work, and more immediate workforce demands in requesting comprehensive support for student parents. Institutions can connect their student parent work with efforts to improve completion rates and fill gaps in the skilled workforce.





FOCUS GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Members of our regional focus groups also shared recommendations for higher education institutions seeking to provide greater support for student parents. This list blends the expertise and insights from student parents, higher education professionals, and philanthropists. We view this list as a starting point to be built upon as institutions turn their focus to collecting data and incorporating the student parent voice into their decision making. Our recommendations are reinforced by the student parent experience and apply a racial-equity lens in their consideration.

- 1 Engage in opportunities to shift campus culture.** Higher education institutions that are ready to focus on student parent support should consider capacity-building programs such as FamilyU. With the inaugural cohort launched in July 2021, FamilyU is designed to meet institutions where they are to develop a stronger support system for the parenting students enrolled at their institutions. The FamilyU program includes a comprehensive, customized, evidence-based, two-year capacity-building experience designed to build and refine institutional competencies to improve student parent success as well as customized engagements for higher education entities to improve their student parent outcomes.

To learn more about FamilyU, please visit: generationhope.org/higher-ed-technical-assistance

- 2 Dedicate resources to support student parents.** Successful student parent work will require investments, but there are opportunities for colleges to invest in student parent efforts that will also benefit other institution-wide initiatives and student groups; use existing resources to support this population; and implement changes that do not require major expenditures. Making a clear connection between ensuring parenting students are completing and the strategic goals of the institution will assist in attracting resources to fully support this population. Additionally, discussing student parents as a student group that overlaps with key student groups, such as students of color and first-generation college students, rather than a separate, niche population, will also allow institutions to access existing dollars to support their student parent work. There are also funding opportunities through state and local partnerships as well as federal grants. In 2018, the Childcare Access Means Parents In School (CCAMPIS) program was expanded from \$15 million to \$50 million to provide increased funding for colleges and universities to provide childcare for students — either through childcare partnerships or on-campus childcare. The expansion of these federal funds have allowed more institutions like Northern Virginia Community College, a FamilyU partner, to alleviate some of the financial burdens for student parents. Although there was an expected uptick in CCAMPIS awards, we have seen a decrease in campus childcare options¹¹, and there is consistently leftover funding that goes unawarded.

While some funding for student parent supports already exists, this work requires more investments from institutions, federal, state, and local governments, philanthropy, and the private sector for deeper impact and scale. Lastly, we encourage institutions to think creatively about how to create more family-friendly campuses at a low cost. For example, ensuring that a college's marketing collateral and website reflect parenting students requires little investment but can powerfully communicate that parenting students are welcomed and supported at that institution.



3 Create a culture of belonging. Generation Hope’s [national survey](#) revealed that many student parents feel unwelcomed on their campus especially in the creation of academic and social spaces, programming, and student engagement.¹⁶ According to a recent [report](#) from Ascend at the Aspen Institute and the JED Foundation, younger student parents (between ages 18–29) are even less likely to feel welcome on their college campus than their older parenting peers.¹⁷ These factors contribute significantly to the decreased mental health of student parents and can impact their ability to persist, and they can be compounded by other exclusionary practices within higher education for students of color. Shifting campus culture can begin with colleges including student parents in their marketing and campus materials and customizing orientations to accommodate parenting needs. George Mason University, one of our inaugural FamilyU partners, offers childcare at its new student orientations and other on-campus events to encourage the attendance of student parents and retain them once they begin classes. Another FamilyU partner, Montgomery College, hosts an annual single student parent conference to build community among this student population and to connect them with resources and tools to support them through college completion. Visibility and consideration go a long way to increase feelings of belonging by college students.

4 Offer flexibility. The inflexible nature of traditional academic programs can be an impediment to retention and student advancement, in particular for student parents who arrive at a postsecondary institution from a myriad of pathways. Many student parents are enrolled at community colleges making the transfer pathway a likely academic journey for parents enrolled at undergraduate institutions. The level of academic rigor can vary significantly by institution and can leave a student less prepared when they matriculate from high school to a postsecondary institution or transfer from a two-year college to a four-year college. This transition can be even more difficult when we consider the number of student parents who have some college, but no degree, and are returning after a significant pause. Some colleges have embraced credit for prior learning (CPL) as a solution for student parents and other special populations of students. Through CPL, postsecondary institutions can award academic credit for a student’s expertise and knowledge acquired through lived and professional experience. Trinity Washington University, another FamilyU partner, has developed a creative approach for supporting students from less rigorous institutions. They have removed developmental coursework from their course offerings and added a fourth credit where additional support was needed for the student. This change removes some of the academic burden from the student and further creates a culture that accepts the wealth of knowledge that students have to bring, regardless of how they arrived in the classroom.



FOCUS GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES, *CONTINUED*

- 5 Recognize that student parent work is racial justice work.** There is an inextricable link between addressing the needs of student parents and doing authentic and actionable diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work within higher education institutions. The majority of student parents are students of color. In fact, forty percent of all Black female undergraduate students in the U.S. are parenting.²¹ If colleges and universities want to see better completion rates for students of color, then student parent work must be a priority. In order for these students to be successful, they must feel valued, represented, and included. Therefore, inherent within the prioritization of student parents is a deep social justice impact that will allow institutions to make strides in their race and gender equity work. At Generation Hope, our commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion begins with centering the needs of our Scholars and having their voice represented in conversations that impact them. Through FamilyU, we reinforce this practice as a strategy to bolster the DEI work of partner institutions.

CONCLUSION

Student parents deserve the opportunity to create the life that they desire for themselves and their families and a quality postsecondary education can be a pathway to do so. When we don't recognize the needs and tremendous assets of student parents enrolled in colleges across the country, we create additional barriers to completion, work against larger enrollment and retention goals, and impede the success of the next generation of learners — their children. As one of our alumna, Yoslin, has said, **"if you aren't at the table, then you are on the menu."** Through this report and the recommendations of our focus group participants, we endeavor to ensure that student parents have a seat and a voice at the table.



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ABOUT GENERATION HOPE

Founded in 2010, Generation Hope is a nonprofit organization in Washington, DC. To ensure all student parents have the opportunities to succeed and experience economic mobility, Generation Hope engages education and policy partners to drive systemic change and provides direct support to teen parents in college as well as their children through holistic, two-generation programming. Fewer than 2% of teen mothers will earn their college degrees before they are 30 years old, but Generation Hope Scholars graduate at a rate that exceeds the national average for all college students, is almost two times the rate of low-income college students, and is almost eight times the rate of single mothers nationwide. Generation Hope engages in local and national advocacy work, amplifying the student-parent voice and centering their experiences. Additionally, Generation Hope leverages its data and best practices to serve as a thought partner, providing colleges with the tools, resources, and support that they need to implement programs, adjust policies, and change structures and culture to improve outcomes for student parents.

For questions about the survey or requests for partnership on implementing best practices for student-parent success, please contact:

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