

ON A JOURNEY FOR FAMILIES:

Lessons Learned from Colleges Investing in Student Parents

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INTRODUCTION



Since its founding in March 2010, Generation Hope has helped teen parents graduate from college through our Scholar Program, which provides teen parents (Scholars) with one-on-one mentoring, holistic case management, mental health services, financial assistance, academic support, and career and life skills development. In supporting more than 400 Scholars over the years, we saw an opportunity to improve outcomes for student parents nationwide by helping higher education institutions and organizations better serve them.

In 2019, Generation Hope took the first steps to develop systems-change interventions by convening a task force, conducting focus groups, executing a national survey, and hosting several exploratory meetings with community partners. These efforts led to the design of a multi-phase curriculum to help colleges and universities transform into family-inclusive institutions.

In the midst of a global pandemic, this technical assistance program, called FamilyU, launched in August 2021 with a pilot cohort of four institutions in the D.C. metro region: George Mason University (Mason), Montgomery College (MC), Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA), and Trinity Washington University (Trinity). Although administrators were navigating unprecedented challenges impacting their professional bandwidth and personal well-being and while the conditions to launch this pilot were nothing like we had originally envisioned, the FamilyU institutional teams worked diligently with our coaches to achieve their [FamilyU outcomes](#).

Since the launch of our inaugural cohort, Generation Hope has welcomed two additional FamilyU Cohorts, engaging a total of 16 institutions nationwide in developing innovative supports for student parents. The 2021 Cohort, which completed its two-year engagement in July 2023, informed subsequent cohort experiences, and through this report, we are sharing our lessons learned with the greater community. Our hope is that these insights will help community, education, and philanthropic leaders further understand the FamilyU model, the challenges and importance of institutionalizing student parent support, and tactics for enhancing their own inclusion efforts for this population.

WHAT IS FAMILYU?

FamilyU is a comprehensive, customized, evidence-based, two-year capacity-building experience designed to build and refine institutional competencies to improve student-parent success. Each FamilyU Cohort institution identified a team of representatives from key functional areas to participate in and receive:

- A **customized work plan** guided by Generation Hope’s **Student Parent Campus Capacity Assessment**,
- A **dedicated coach** to facilitate **customized, monthly coaching sessions** and offer expertise in supporting each institution’s student parent efforts,
- Interactive, quarterly **cohort convenings**,
- A **Student Parent Fellow** to center the **student parent voice** throughout each institution’s student parent work,
- A **site visit and executive session** focused on observing and reporting the progress of each institution’s student parent work.

In addition to focusing on the four **Core Competencies for Student Parent Success**, a critical tenant of FamilyU is our focus on racial equity and addressing racial disparities faced by student parents of color. In addition to explicitly addressing racial and gender inequities, throughout our time together, 2021 Cohort members witnessed the authentic inclusion of student parent voices as we intentionally centered their needs and experiences and positioned them as experts. Our student parent-centered design is embedded in **our outcomes for each FamilyU institution**, which include:

- Increase awareness of the student parent population enrolled and their needs for college completion,
- Boost student enrollment, retention, and completion rates,
- Enhance institution-wide student parent work, engaging various departments and key stakeholders,
- Build deep relationships with peer institutions and field experts working to improve student outcomes,
- Improve data collection methods and tools to better track the parenting status of students,
- Develop and implement racially equitable, parent-friendly policies at all levels of campus to help students thrive,
- Cultivate student-parent champions to galvanize systems-change efforts.

The 2021 FamilyU Cohort institutions developed and implemented strategies to mitigate and remove structural barriers impacting student parents success with a goal of improving outcomes in the areas of enrollment, retention, graduation rates, and post-graduation employment.



FamilyU can be described as intensified support to help institutions identify barriers, set goals, and stay focused to achieve them, while working alongside advocates and experts in the work of supporting student parents.”

Dr. Sally Sagen Lorentson,
Assistant VP University Life
at George Mason University,
2021 FamilyU Cohort Participant

INAUGURAL COHORT: BY THE NUMBERS



4 COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

- 3 Minority Serving Institutions
- 1 Predominantly White Institution

- * **2 Four-Year Universities** (Mason, Trinity)
- * **2 Community Colleges** (NOVA, MC)
- * **13 Campuses** across the mid-Atlantic region



APPROXIMATELY 25,000 STUDENT PARENTS

(roughly **115,000** total students at institutions)



4 STUDENT PARENT FELLOWS

with a total of **7 children**



4 CORE COMPETENCIES

Data, People, Policy, and Culture



8 COHORT CONVENINGS



58 CUSTOMIZED INSTITUTIONAL COACHING SESSIONS HELD

INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE — LESSONS LEARNED

- 1. Student parent work is racial equity work.** Embracing student parent work as a driving force for racial equity was a defining objective in our inaugural FamilyU Cohort. The challenges and disparities faced by Black, Latinx, and Indigenous student parents nationally elevated the pressing need to reframe institutional policy through a lens that doesn't merely aim for neutrality, but actively and intentionally breaks down barriers and bolsters support for diverse groups of students, including parents. Incorporating race equity work into student parent work was not simply about rewriting policies with a student-parent lens, but confronting institutionalized racial disparities and intentionally writing policies in a way that fosters a culture of inclusivity for all students. At the end of the cohort experience, **100% of participating institutions reported applying an equity-driven student parent lens to policy development and evaluation** — a concrete step towards realizing racial equity and its direct impact on the student experience in higher education.
- 2. Real change (nearly) always starts with student parent data and awareness.** Many higher education institutions have no data or limited data specific to their student parent population, and our inaugural FamilyU Cohort was no exception. To better inform their work and improve student outcomes, institutions must strive to systematically collect students' parenting statuses on a consistent basis and disaggregate this across intersecting identities. After participating in the FamilyU Cohort, **all of the 2021 Cohort institutions are collecting students' parenting status and disaggregating the data** across the intersecting identities of race, marital status, gender, sex, and student classification.
- 3. Diversity of thought and representation are integral to creating systemic change.** Each institutional team had representation from five key functional areas: financial aid, academic instruction, student services, institutional research, and facilities management. This intentional team design cuts across divisional silos, promotes systems-level thinking, and expedites institution-wide culture change. Creating cross-functional teams brought key institutional decision-makers together that previously had not worked together. After one year of participating in FamilyU, **100% of participants reported their engagement with FamilyU enhanced their relationships with their institutional team members** as well as deepened their professional relationships with other student parent champions across their institution.
- 4. Establishing direct lines of communication and valuing the lived expertise of student parents are priorities.** A crucial piece for our inaugural FamilyU Cohort was providing opportunities for direct communication between student parents and higher education administrators. Understanding that student parents are experts in their own experiences created



It wasn't until we worked with Generation Hope, FamilyU, that we pulled the data and were surprised by the number of student parents we had...Using this data, we advocated for a family-friendly space on a campus where space is scarce."

Trisha Smith
University Librarian, Trinity
Washington University



Student Parent Fellows Spotlight

One of the common threads woven throughout Generation Hope's work is valuing and centering the expertise of students and families. For FamilyU, this is exemplified through the Student Parent Fellowship Program. Joining the FamilyU Cohort experience in the second year, Fellows are integral members of each school's team and are considered leaders who work alongside academic and administrative staff to drive authentic change benefiting parenting students at their institutions. Generation Hope compensates our Fellows to support their time and commitment to the year-long Fellowship.

Over the course of the year, each Student Parent Fellow spearheads an Advocacy Project that complements the efforts of their institution's FamilyU work plan while also increasing awareness of student parents and enhancing institution-wide student-parent work. For the Fellows, the process of completing their Advocacy Project enhances their ability to advocate and strengthens their career-readiness and leadership skills.



the foundation for genuinely effective and inclusive policies and support systems. Integral to this process was onboarding the [FamilyU Student Parent Fellows](#) in Year 2, who helped promote student-parent belonging and ensure that institutional changes were grounded in the real-life experiences and expertise of parenting students.

5. Student Parent Champions are changemakers. Institutions must cultivate champions on campus who understand and effectively advocate for the student parent population across various functional areas. Within our inaugural FamilyU Cohort, **100% of the institutions reported identifying and engaging at least 25 new student parent champions across various departments** by the end of Year 2. To ensure a wide network of advocates, institutions shared disaggregated student parent data and held student parent centered awareness events and trainings. These efforts helped to create institutional cultures that recognize the value student parents bring to the institution as well as the barriers they often face.

6. Passion can catalyze student-parent work, but committed staffing, funding, and resources are needed to sustain it. While intrinsic motivation can be a driving force of student parent work, our inaugural cohort emphasized the necessity of committed staffing and funding resources to ensure the work endures. In an era where institutions continue to face constraints such as staff turnover and competing priorities, having structured goals, accountability measures, and dedicated collaboration opportunities is paramount. Tasking student-parent initiatives to faculty or staff without job descriptions, budgets, or resources dedicated specifically to student parents weakens the accountability and ability to execute deliverables. Similarly, assuming student parent work can be achieved by student parents volunteering their time is an injustice to those students and all student parents.

7. A values-aligned movement enhances stamina. Our inaugural FamilyU Cohort highlighted the power of collective efforts in driving student parent success and maintaining momentum in the face of roadblocks. The Cohort first began meeting virtually due to the global pandemic. In Year 2, when it became safe to do so, in-person convenings emerged as crucial community-building tools, creating opportunities for intentional networking and shared learning. **All participants reported the cohort model enhanced their knowledge, skills, and connectedness to student parent work, and 92% of participants reported that an approach shared by a cohort member significantly benefited their institutional team.** Broad stakeholder engagement, encompassing both campus representatives and community partners, early and often in student parent work enriched the diversity of perspectives and innovation, amplifying the impact of the institutions' efforts.

8. While each institution is different, we still learn from one another. Our inaugural FamilyU Cohort included two-year, four-year, minority serving, predominantly white, public, and private colleges and universities. Despite their distinct contexts, challenges, and strategies, the cohort members found significant value in the shared learning space that the cohort model provided. This underscored that even as each institution is unique, the potential for cross-institutional learning is immense. That said, a one-size-fits-all approach isn't applicable when tackling student-parent work. With the support of their Generation Hope coach, shared experiences in the cohort were tailored to the specific needs of each institution. This collective, yet customized, learning contributes to a more inclusive, accessible, and supportive higher education landscape for student parents.

The inaugural Student Parent Fellows Advocacy Projects included:

- Creating a Student Parent Alliance to host family-friendly events (Lorraine Oyetubo, Trinity Washington University)
- Coordinating the collection, creation, and distribution of child activity kits across three campuses (Najah Mills, Montgomery College)
- Facilitating monthly family-friendly activities that strengthen expressive practices (Valeria Fernandez, George Mason University)
- Founding a Student Parent Alliance that also functions as an advisory council (Mercy Osei-Hwedie, Northern Virginia Community College)

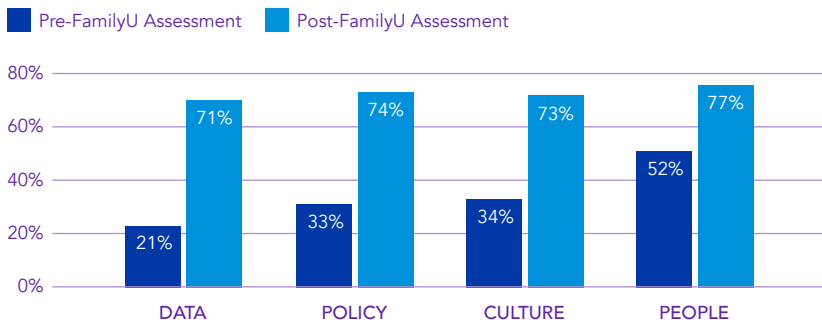


It is in collaboration with you all, that I have beat the odds stacked against me, that I get to experience life outside of poverty, that my children get a chance at seeing where support gets you, and to show others that despite how short or long it takes, the bumps in your journey will make sense when you end up where you were meant to be all along.” Najah Mills, 2021 FamilyU

Cohort Student Parent Fellow, Montgomery College

FAMILYU BY THE NUMBERS

Student Parent Campus Capacity Assessment Average Scores



FamilyU Cohort institutions complete Generation Hope’s Student Parent Campus Capacity Assessment (SPCCA) to identify what student parent supportive policies and practices exist at their institution and at what stage of application those policies and practices are in: Conceptualizing, Formalizing, Implementing, or Systemic. Each policy and practice aligns with one of four [Student Parent Success Core Competencies](#): Data, Policy, Culture, and People. From beginning FamilyU in July 2021 to completing the two-year capacity building program in July 2023, the Cohort demonstrated 25–50% growth across all four competencies — with the most significant growth in student parent data collection, utilization, and distribution practices and policies.

Notable Accomplishments



In spring of 2023, Mason revised their admissions application to collect incoming students’ parenting status.

ROUGHLY 25,000 Mason applicants will complete this form each year.



58 ADDITIONAL DIAPER CHANGING STATIONS were installed in restrooms located throughout Montgomery College’s **3 campuses**.



NOVA created and launched a **Title IX website** that is available to their nearly **70,000 STUDENTS**. The website provides comprehensive information and resources for parenting and pregnant students.



Trinity designed a family-friendly student area in their library to provide safe spaces for families to **GATHER, STUDY, AND BUILD COMMUNITY** set to open in Fall 2023.

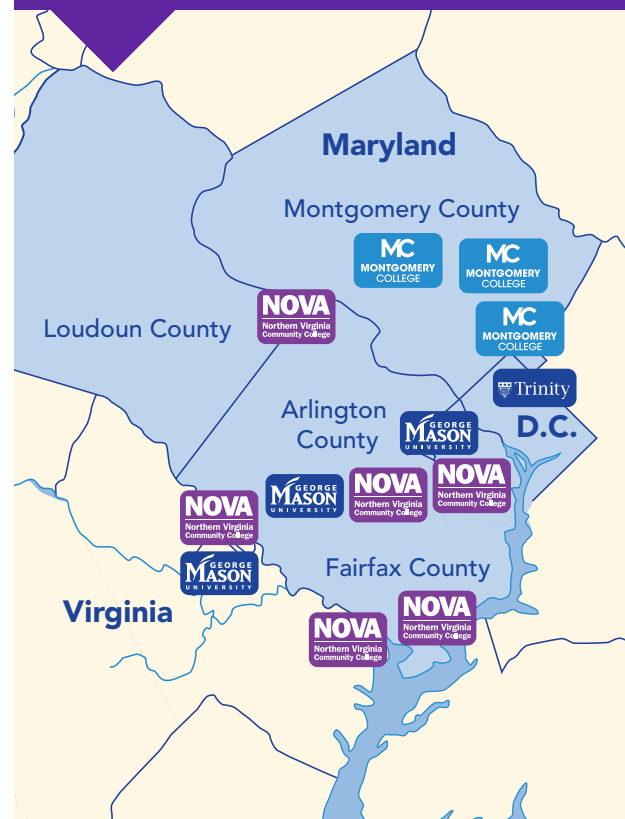
FAMILYU COHORT IMPACT

100% OF COHORT PARTICIPANTS stated they made connections with Cohort members from other institutions, met experts in the field, and deepened professional relationships with other student parent champions across their institutions

100% OF PARTICIPANTS AGREED/ STRONGLY AGREED the cohort model enhanced their knowledge, skills, and connectedness to student parent work

ALL FAMILYU INSTITUTIONS are committed to simplifying policies and processes across the institution

CAMPUSES FAMILYU HAS SERVED



CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

The FamilyU Cohort experience had a positive impact on our inaugural institutions' ability to serve and support their approximately 25,000 student parents. In addition to providing each institution with \$20,000 at the completion of FamilyU to further the sustainability and reach of their student parent support efforts, we will continue to work with these institutions over the next two years in tracking student parent enrollment, persistence, and graduation rates. Together, our Cohort teams have been and will continue to be a formidable force advocating for student parents, driving systemic change, and shaping higher education into a more accessible and supportive environment for this key demographic. We will take the lessons learned over the last two years and apply them to future iterations of FamilyU, sharing best practices and key takeaways with the larger student parent success movement.

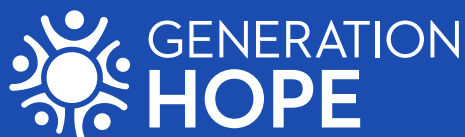


I now think about student parents as we communicate with students and design programs and policies. This now is at the forefront of my mind — taking their unique positions into consideration.” 2021 FamilyU Cohort Participant

ABOUT GENERATION HOPE

Founded in 2010, Generation Hope is a nonprofit organization that engages education and policy partners to drive systemic change and provides direct support to teen parents in college (i.e. Scholars) as well as their children through holistic, two-generation programming to ensure all student parents have the opportunities to succeed and experience economic mobility. We engage in local and national advocacy work, amplifying the student-parent voice and centering their experiences. We also leverage our data and best practices to serve as a thought partner to colleges, providing them 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.

To date, our Scholar Program has served 450 teen parents in college and celebrated 172 degrees. We currently serve 200 Scholars in the D.C. metro region and New Orleans area. We have also worked with more than 20 colleges and universities to enhance their student parent work through our technical assistance program, FamilyU, impacting nearly 100,000 student parents across the country. Find out more at generationhope.org.



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