



Like a Juggler

The Experiences of Racially Minoritized Student Parents in a California Community College

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THIS BRIEF PROVIDES AN OVERVIEW of findings from research conducted for Coastal City College* which sought to understand the collegiate experiences of student parents. This study utilized in-depth, one-on-one interviews and focus groups with racially minoritized student parents to explore how they navigated community college, received information, and made decisions about future careers during the 2018–2019 academic year.

We found that student parents maintain high educational aspirations and occupational goals despite the struggles and daily challenges they experience in pursuit of their community college education. Our findings suggest there was significant room at this college – and likely others – to adjust policies and practices to better serve student parents and their children, and to increase their chances to succeed academically and occupationally and gain social and economic stability. Importantly, this study revealed barriers that student parents faced in accessing campus space with their children.

Background and Context

In California, policymakers and community colleges are considering new strategies to better serve a significant but often overlooked population in higher education: student parents. Compounding the challenges of paying the full costs of college attendance, the costs of housing, transportation, and food pose a significant barrier to college completion for low-income students in California, especially if they are parenting. Moreover, the Center for American Progress reports that 60% of California residents live in a “childcare desert” in which licensed or high-quality affordable options are scant. Childcare deserts are more common in urban communities and they affect approximately 67% of Latinx and 64% of Black/African Americans in the state¹. Research also suggests that COVID-19 will further exacerbate inequities in access to childcare for racially minoritized parents.²

“It’s like, how do you say, like a juggler. You have to try to juggle school, work, the kids, a little alone time, a lot of study time, a lot of homework time.”

– EVELYN*, MOTHER OF THREE

“My son is what motivates me, to get him a better future. So that way he can see that, ‘okay, well, Mommy went to college. So, I want to go to college too to get a better degree, to get a better job.’”

– ARIANA, MOTHER OF ONE

DATA AND METHODS

In collaboration with Coastal City College and its student parents, researchers from Long Beach City College (LBCC), the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), and the University of Southern California (USC) conducted qualitative individual interviews and focus groups with 67 racially minoritized (Black, Latinx, Asian American and Pacific Islander) student parents enrolled in the college during the 2018–2019 academic year.

We reached out via email to 145 students; of those, 67 participated in an interview and/or focus group that centered on access to childcare, time management, course scheduling, and challenges of navigating community college while raising children. Participants were recruited through campus programs and services such as Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education (CARE), Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS), the on-campus childcare center, and other campus-based services for first-generation and low-income students. Not all students in this study were involved in campus-based programs due to eligibility restrictions. Administrators, faculty, and staff provided contacts for additional student parents who shared their experiences navigating their college experience.

Interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accurate representations of students' experiences. The research team created a codebook based on the literature on career aspirations and student parents in higher education and utilized deductive and inductive coding to find themes across student parents' experiences in the college context.

Coastal City College was chosen for this research because of the campus administration's eagerness to address student parent needs and raise faculty and staff awareness of those needs. The college enrolls just under 25,000 students, of which the majority (60%) self-identify as Latinx, 13% White, 11% Black/African American, 11% Asian American or Pacific Islander and 5% as multiracial or chose not to answer. Campus data suggest that almost 15% of the students enrolled at Coastal City College are student parents.

“I don't have time for me, and for my daughter. It's just, I mean, it's a few hours. So, if I am not sleeping or eating, I am studying.”

– DIANA, MOTHER OF ONE

While a full count of parenting students in California has not been captured, the Institute for Women's Policy Research identified 3.8 million student parents enrolled in higher education institutions nationally (in the 2015–2016 academic year), meaning that more than one-fifth (22%) of all undergraduates had dependent children. These proportions are higher among low-income, first-generation students (36% of whom have dependents), and racially minoritized students (39% of Black undergraduates, for example, have dependents). Across the U.S., student parents are concentrated in community colleges, which enroll 42 percent of all student parents in higher education.³

By matching data from California community college enrollments to financial and other aid applications, researchers from the University of California Davis found that 13.4% of students applying for financial aid in 2018–19 identified themselves as parents. Of those, nearly three in four (72%) stated intent to enroll in a California community college.⁴

Student parents face difficulties navigating higher education as they have multiple responsibilities which include college courses and homework, childcare, work for pay, and often face unanticipated events such as the illness of their children.⁵ Student parents, who are most often low-income, may also struggle to secure basic needs such as food, internet access, personal computers, and reliable transportation.⁶ As such, student parents often “stop and drop” their college courses and (re)enroll in college to pursue credentials and degrees for careers that provide them financial stability. Although student parents hold high educational aspirations,⁷ they face barriers in enrolling in courses, navigating complicated financial aid processes and degree requirements, and securing affordable childcare that enables them to focus on college.⁸

Findings

While our findings are specific to the student parent experiences at Coastal City College, they may contribute to a broader understanding of student parents' needs among community college leaders, faculty, and staff. At the college we studied, we found:

Environments and messages were often unfriendly to student parents.

Classrooms, academic counseling offices, and libraries have policies that forbid children from being in those spaces. Student parents shared photos of signs that stated, "No children allowed in this office!" Students reported arriving at an academic counseling appointment with their children and being forced to cancel or reschedule their appointment. Such visible signs clearly communicated to student parents that they were unwelcomed. Furthermore, the signs and similar institutional practices favor students who are childless and erect barriers for student parents who may have had limited childcare. One parent we interviewed put it this way:

"You're dealing with the stigma -- 'I am the only one in college that's a single mom' -- and if I am struggling -- why don't I just work full time and get the money and get the hell out of [community college] instead of me trying to pursue a higher education?"

Programs designed for student parents are not available to all.

Stringent policies, practices or eligibility requirements prevented some student parents from accessing campus-based programs and services. For example, eligibility requirements prevented student parent participation in various campus and statewide services and resources due to exceeding academic credit hours (for example, student parents started college in 2010, dropped out, and then returned to college in 2017). Student parents faced setbacks in accessing on-campus childcare centers, due to limited space, or if their children did not meet age eligibility requirements (for example, only children under age 4). Prolonged or unpredictable enrollment patterns (for example, having to unexpectedly drop courses due to changes in work schedule,

childcare support, or economic concerns) hurt access to campus or state-based programs such as EOPS, which may impact scholarships and financial aid awards. A mother of one said:

"It's really hard outside of school, so why should it be harder inside school? Why should we be on a two-year waiting list [for the childcare center]?"

Dedicated campus programs have provided essential support.

Half of the student parents we interviewed were involved in campus services such as EOPS, CARE, and Greater Avenues for Independence (GAIN), which provide networks of support, accurate college information, and layered campus and community-based support systems for the children of students. These campus programs helped students untangle complex college information about internships and possible career placement with credentials or associate degrees, and provided clear support on how to earn credentials or college degrees to transfer to four-year colleges and universities. As one student parent said:

"I did start going to GAIN and they helped me get my feet wet first. EOPS guided me more thoroughly with the education plan, giving me a plan on paper saying what classes I should take during what semesters, and kind of guiding me through that. So that was a big help on getting started into my career choice."

Student parents struggle to meet their basic needs.

Many student parents cited challenges with home-based technology, such as having to share one laptop with their children or not having high-speed internet. Additionally, student parents shared transportation challenges, such as having to travel with small children on public transportation to local schools and then to college, limiting time and flexibility needed to seek informal support or mentoring from teaching faculty or counselors. One interviewee, a single mother, said:

"I can't afford Internet. So that's another challenge for me. I try to work with what I have."

Student parents balance multiple demands.

These demands, from children, employers, significant others/partners, faculty, and others stretch each waking moment and elevate stress. A single miscalculation can upend their daily, weekly, or semester-long goals and objectives. Many student parents shared that they are unable to enroll in certain academic courses due to restricted childcare hours or support. In addition to managing their own coursework, they support their children's homework, domestic responsibilities (e.g., meals, washing clothes, bathing children, unexpected illnesses and doctor's appointments, or lending support to extended families). These demands on their time limit studying to the late evening or before dawn, when they have time and space to concentrate on assignments and tests. One student parent said:

"[My kids] really request a lot of my time, so I do try to be very present when I'm with them. I try not to do homework in front of them because they want my attention. I try to separate school and I try to separate my time with them. So that's why I like to do a lot of my homework at school because it shows them that I'm not ignoring them."

Some student parents are unaware of valuable resources, such as the campus career center, that are available to them.

A majority of student parents in our sample did not know of the existence or utility of career and job connections at the college. When asked with whom they discussed career or workforce concerns, interviewees focused on teaching faculty and academic counselors as primary sources of information about career readiness, regional labor markets and current or post-college employment opportunities. One interviewee stated:

"I never even knew that the [career center] offered assistance on getting hired or looking for a job or anything like that. I just assumed that oh, careers, once you getting ready to leave the school, or you have a degree, [the career center] can help you get an internship somewhere or something to that effect. But I never thought people who just need jobs"

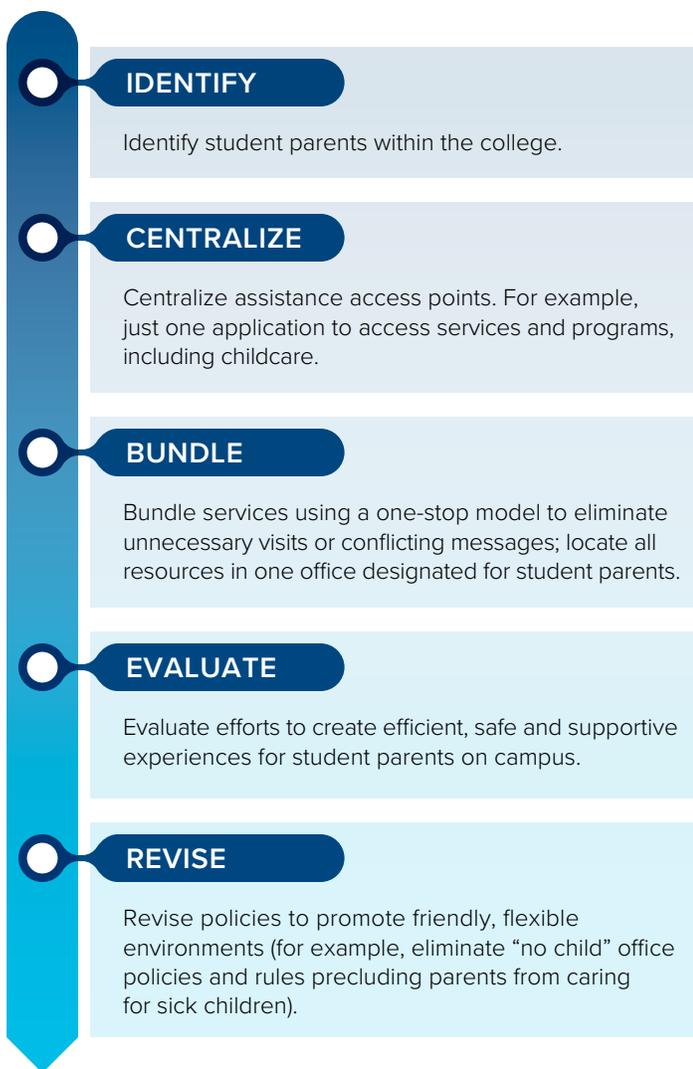
Implications for Policy and Practice

Coastal City College's desire to improve services to student parents, and students' candor about their goals and experiences, produces insights that can inform policy and practice more broadly. These can be grouped in the following areas:

- Identification:** Serving student parents starts with knowing who they are and how many there are. Identification of this population can happen at initial enrollment, when they apply for financial aid, in the re-enrollment process each semester, or when students seek campus-based programs and services for parents. Each stage of the enrollment management process is critical to ensure that student parents are receiving the services they are entitled to through local, state, or federal resources.
- Connection to Resources:** Once student parents are identified on individual campuses, it is important to connect them to all available resources for which they are eligible. Efficient combinations, or bundling, of resources and support services benefit not only the individual student, but also their children and partners. This intergenerational model of support is not a new idea, but a necessary step to ensure holistic support, retention and graduation of student parents. Federal programs such as Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS),⁹ the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG),¹⁰ and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)¹¹ offer child care and nutrition supports that can prove invaluable to parents' ability to stay in college. Awareness of eligibility for SNAP benefits can be built through workshops to help student parents apply and receive benefits. This session should include a local social worker or case manager from human services agencies.
- Employment Through Work-Study:** Determine if student parents are eligible for work-study and hire them as campus peer advisors for new student parents. This can help new student parents be aware of and navigate services, programs, and resources, but also begin to develop a network of support.
- Strategies for Stress Reduction:** Offer on-line workshops for student parents to understand how to manage and deal with stress and anxiety. This can be through formal programming with the counseling center or a local mental health partner. This is even more important now, as the pressures of COVID-19 pose serious challenges.

Figure 1 illustrates a recommended continuum, from identification of individual student parents to efficient provision of bundled services to continuous improvement efforts, that is a model for serving students in community colleges.

Figure 1. A Recommended Continuum of Campus Action to Serve Student Parents



For student parents to succeed academically, community colleges need systems to identify student parents, assess their needs and provide timely and accurate information regarding financial aid, local and subsidized child care, degree requirements, and employment opportunities. Wherever possible, student parents should have access to on-campus work-study employment and clear career information and opportunities to engage with the local job market after graduation. Finally, community colleges must also evolve as family-friendly environments that embrace and recognize the holistic needs of student parents both in and out of the classroom.

Guiding Questions for Campus CEOs, Administrators, Faculty and Staff

- Does the campus promote messages or policy language that make student parents feel unwelcomed? (e.g., signs that prohibit the presence of children)
- Are resources for student parents – local, state, federal – “bundled” to promote efficiency and take-up?
- Does the campus provide a “single stop” resource center or other centralized access point for student parents to learn about and apply for all available social, financial, and academic resources?
- Does the leadership team dedicate time to understanding the academic, social, logistical and financial aid needs of student parent and strategizing about how to meet them?
- Does that team receive feedback and advice from student parents?
- Does the campus provide student parent focused workshops to promote positive mental health, intergenerational stress management, prosocial parenting strategies, and literacy?

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Endnotes

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- ¹⁰ CCAMPIS is a federal program that provides institutions resources to offer before- and after-school services to children. These resources can also be expanded to help children in the area surrounding the community college.
- ¹¹ CCDBG is a federal program that provides resources and scholarships for student parents and local institutions to support the growth and preparedness of low-income children for K-8 education (under age 13). A CCDBG award can be blended with local and state resources to support children and parents. Community colleges can apply and then use federal funds to support on or off-campus childcare centers and training.
- ¹¹ SNAP is a federal program that provides nutrition benefits to supplement the food budget of needy families so they can purchase healthy food and move toward self-sufficiency.