

SUPPORTING PARENTING STUDENTS

Removing Barriers and Creating Pathways to Postsecondary Success

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Since 2016, ECMC Foundation has invested in the success of parenting students in postsecondary education. In 2020, the Foundation deepened its commitment by launching the five-year Parenting Student Success Initiative (formerly the Single Mother Student Success Initiative). This initiative directly contributes to ECMC Foundation's North Star of eliminating gaps in postsecondary completion by supporting a significant population of underserved learners. Education Northwest is evaluating the initiative to understand how grantees and their partner institutions and organizations are transforming the postsecondary ecosystem to support parenting students.

This brief provides an update on what the evaluation team has learned so far about the experiences of parenting students. It begins with a snapshot of parenting students nationwide, then shares findings from a survey administered to parenting students as part of the evaluation. The final section provides actionable recommendations directly from parenting students on how colleges can better support them in their educational journeys and academic success.



A national snapshot. Who are parenting students?

According to nationally representative data from the 2020 National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey:



Parenting students make up 18 percent of the undergraduate population. Among them, **75 percent are mothers**, and **the majority (60%) are single mothers.**



The demographics of parenting students are becoming more diverse and differ from those of nonparenting students. **Parenting students are more likely to be students of color, from low-income backgrounds, first-generation college students, and older than their nonparenting peers.** Most are **over age 24.**



Parenting students are **most likely to attend two-year public institutions.** Over **40 percent of parenting students** who attend a four-year public institution attended a two-year public institution at some point in their academic journey.



Based on their expected family contribution (EFC), most parenting students come from a **low-income background: 65 percent of parenting students** and **86 percent of single mother students** have an EFC of \$0 compared to 29 percent of nonparenting students.¹

Program participant survey data. Understanding the experiences of parenting students

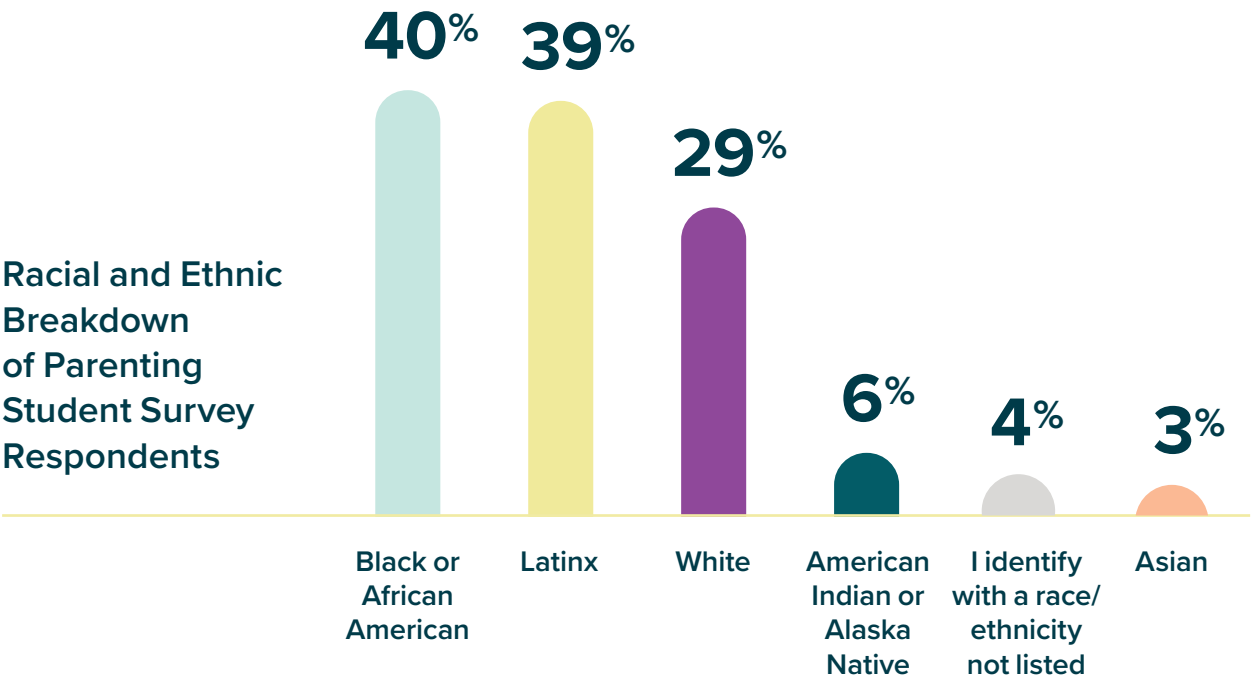
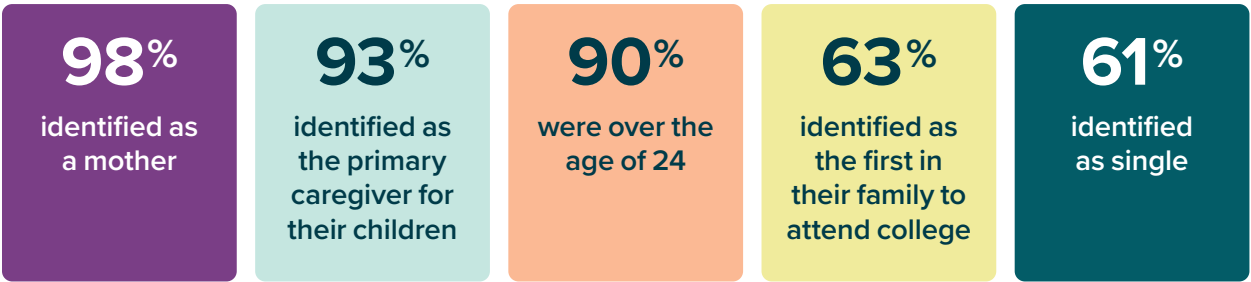
As part of the evaluation of ECMC Foundation's Parenting Student Success Initiative, Education Northwest conducted a survey to understand the experiences of parenting students, focusing on the challenges they face and the support they need to achieve success in postsecondary education. The survey was distributed to 623 student parents who participate in six programs that receive ECMC Foundation grants to provide direct services to parenting students. A total of 368 students responded, resulting in a 60 percent response rate.

The survey findings² represent only a small sample of parenting students nationwide and may not accurately reflect the views or experiences of the entire population. Respondents to the survey attended 110 institutions and were more likely to be single mothers, older, and more diverse than the national population of parenting college students.

¹ Note: EFC is calculated through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and is based on family income and assets. An EFC of \$0 means a student and their family are low income and not expected to contribute financially to the cost of college.

² Source: Education Northwest analysis of parenting student survey data

Parenting students come from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, are over the age of 24, and are mostly single mothers



Parenting students set goals to achieve better lives for themselves and their children

For many parenting students, earning a degree represents a step toward obtaining a more flexible job that offers a higher salary and, ultimately, greater economic opportunities that can create a life of happiness for themselves and their children. Despite facing numerous challenges, parenting students shared how they persisted in their education journey and were determined not to let themselves or their families down. Below we share quotes from single mother students, who were the majority of the survey sample.

“I would love to provide a good life for my children. I want them to grow up in a home full of love and laughter. I want them to know they can always come to me, even with the hard things, and I will still love them unconditionally.”

“I choose to go to college so I can be someone my children can be proud of and so they can see that dreams can come true with a little hard work and determination.”

“My hopes and dreams are for me and my daughter to be happy and financially secure. Growing up in a one-parent household, we had to cut corners when needed and go without things for long periods. I hope to give my daughter everything and more than I had during my childhood.”

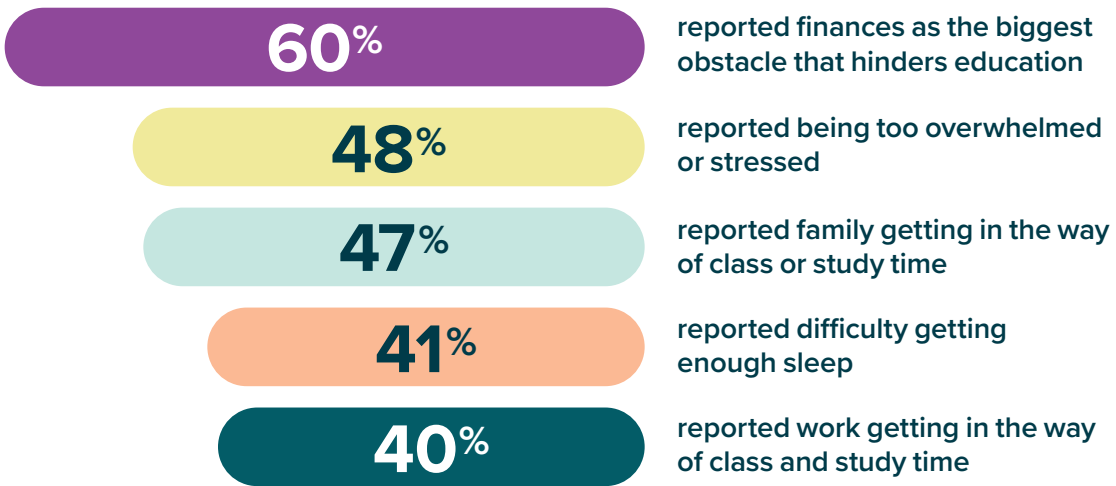
“I got sick of cleaning motels and hotels and working in an overworked environment. I wanted to do more and achieve something I could be proud of. Now I feel like I have my foot in the door.”

“I watched my parents struggle growing up and knew I did not want that for myself. Having my son so young pushed me into overdrive and to enroll in and start nursing school, I wanted to beat the stereotypes everyone set out for me.”



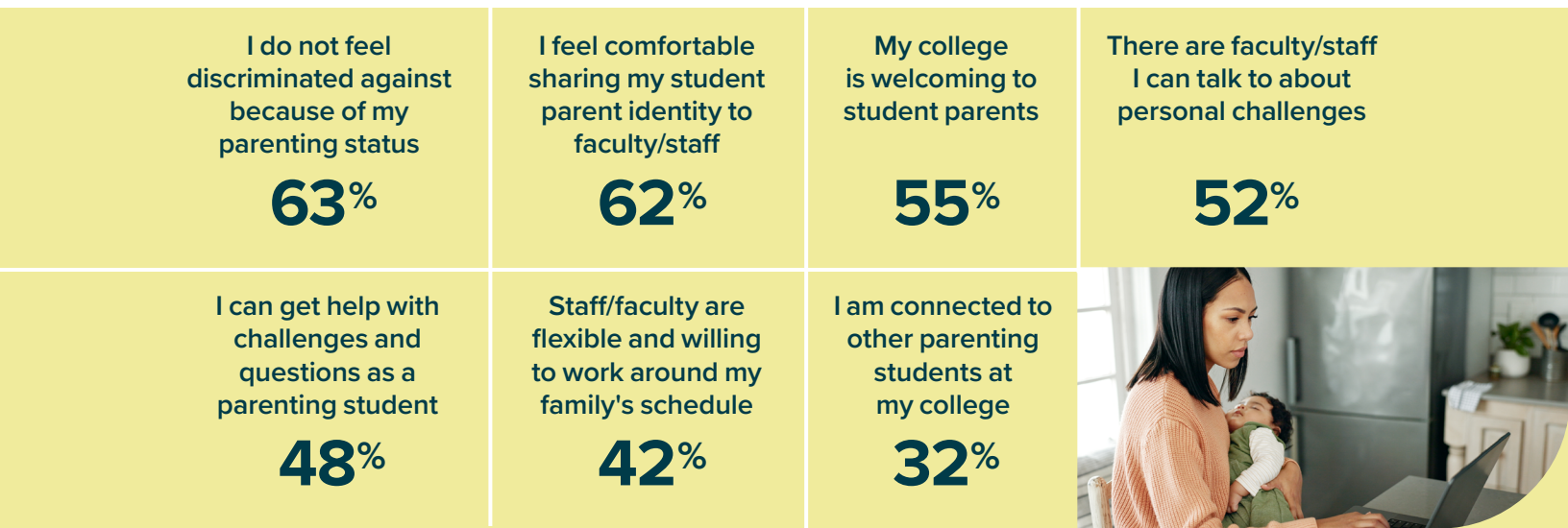
Finances are the biggest obstacle to parenting students' education

More than half (60%) of survey respondents said that finances were the biggest obstacle to their education. Other common challenges faced by parenting students included feeling too overwhelmed or stressed (48%), family getting in the way of class or study time (47%), difficulty getting enough sleep (41%), and work getting in the way of class or study time (40%). Additionally, 10 percent of respondents stated that they did not encounter any challenges, while 6 percent felt that their college campus was an unfriendly environment for families.



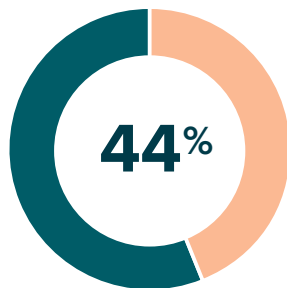
Most parenting students feel welcome on campus, but there is room to improve their connections to the campus community

Although most parenting students said they feel welcomed and accepted at their college campus, some still reported challenges in connecting with college staff members, faculty members, and other parenting students.

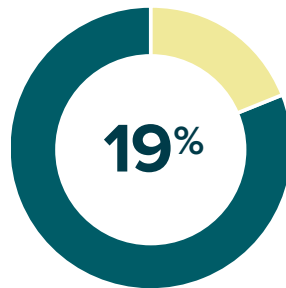


Parenting students have unique needs and require holistic resources and support to achieve academic success

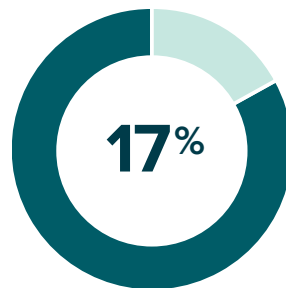
Nearly half of the survey respondents (44%) reported that they were unaware of family-friendly resources available on campus. Additionally, fewer than one-fifth of respondents (19%) indicated that their college offered access to child care services on campus. Only 17 percent stated that their college hosted events specifically for parenting students, and 16 percent reported that their college has resources that support them in accessing child care off campus.



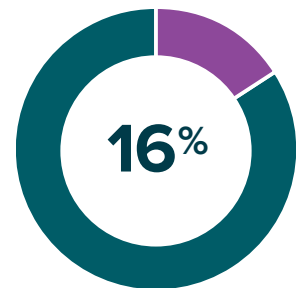
said they are not aware of family-friendly resources on campus



said their college has child care on campus



said their college has events specifically for parenting students



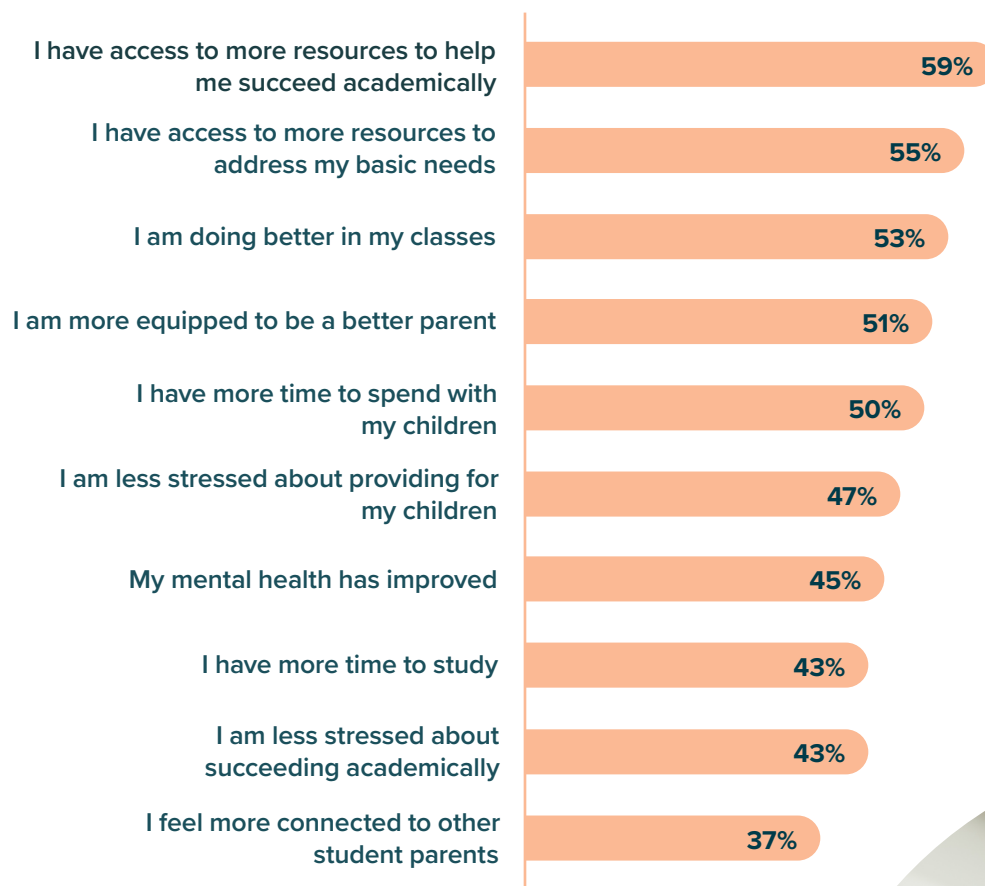
said their college has resources to help them access off-campus child care



Direct service programs fill critical gaps by supporting parenting students in meeting their academic and nonacademic needs

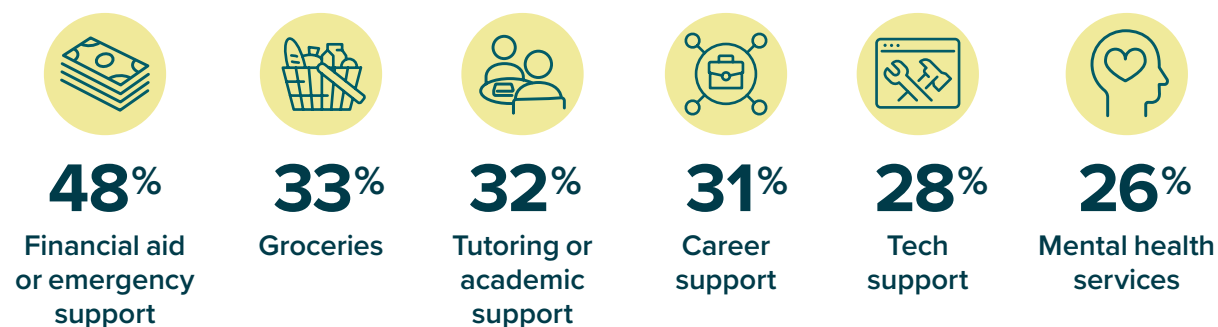
Programs like LIFT, the Jeremiah Program, CAPS, Interfaith Community Services, and Pathways for Single Moms provide resources and support that allow parenting students to focus on their education without feeling pressured or constantly worrying about meeting their own and their families' basic needs.

As a result of their participation in these programs, more than half of the survey respondents reported having access to more resources to help them succeed (59%) and more resources to address their family's basic needs (55%). Fifty-three percent reported doing better in their classes because of their participation in the program.



Direct service programs help parenting students access resources that improve their academic and economic well-being

On the survey, parenting students most frequently reported that their program connected them to the following resources: financial aid or emergency support (48%), groceries (33%), career support (31%), tech support (28%), and mental health services (26%). Parenting students also reported accessing public benefits (23%), affordable child care (20%), and affordable housing (19%) through their direct service programs.



In their own words. How colleges can better support parenting students toward postsecondary success and completion

Parenting students who completed our survey offered ideas for how colleges could better support them on their postsecondary journeys. Below, we share three recommendations grounded in the experiences of parenting students and supported by research literature.

Provide accommodations and flexibility in schedules

Parenting students juggle substantial family and caregiving responsibilities, work, and time constraints, making flexibility essential (Cruse et al., 2018; Cruse et al., 2019). Parenting students reported experiences with faculty and staff members who, at times, did not recognize or accommodate their needs, particularly regarding access to child care and the option to attend classes remotely to better manage their caregiving responsibilities.

“I wish the class schedules weren't at such odd times, or if we had the choice between morning or afternoon classes would help accommodate working parents and school schedules for children.”

“Have more flexibility for people with children and better schedules to match children's daycare or schooling schedules.”

Provide additional support and resources beyond academic support

Parenting students require child care and access to financial and mental health resources that extend beyond typical academic support (Ascend at the Aspen Institute & The Jed Foundation, 2021). Many parenting students desired more on-campus child care options, financial assistance, and family-friendly events and spaces.

“Offer more scholarships specifically for parents, share resources for covering extracurricular activities for children, and make the campus more child friendly.”

“More access to unknown social services through nonprofits and showing people how to get additional assistance with grants and scholarships to continue education beyond the intended certificate or degree.”

Provide parenting students opportunities to connect with each other

Parenting students often face challenges such as time poverty and isolation that impact their educational attainment (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020; Lewis & Polk, 2021). To address these challenges, they need greater access to opportunities that foster connection, engagement, and a sense of community with other parenting students.

“Create a parent student support program, offering academic advising, mentorship, and peer support groups to connect student parents and share resources.”

“Create a communication option to help us connect with other students.”



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About Education Northwest

Education Northwest is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to helping all children and youth reach their full potential. We partner with public, private, and community-based organizations to address educational inequities and improve student success. While most of our work centers on the Pacific Northwest, our evaluations, technical assistance, and research studies have a national impact and provide timely and actionable results.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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